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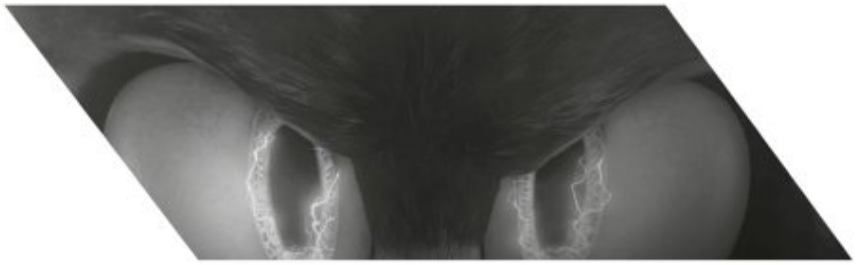
THE HEDGEHOG
A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE!
SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 3:
THE OFFICIAL MOVIE NOVELIZATION



# SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 3:
# THE OFFICIAL MOVIE NOVELIZATION

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# CHAPTER 1

Sonic the Hedgehog was the fastest creature on planet Earth. He was easily the fastest creature in the galaxy. And the known universe? Sure, it was incomprehensibly big. But if he had to bet on it, Sonic would wager that he was the fastest thing alive anywhere.

So, he was definitely the fastest thing at the Wachowski family campsite. And he was going to prove it. Because the fact was, he didn't lose.

"I love the smell of victory in the morning," Sonic said, lazily biting into his favorite snack fresh from the grill. "And chili dogs. Yup. Victory and chili dogs…my two favorite smells."

Beside him, his two best pals bristled with anxiety. The inventive fox Tails and the rough warrior Knuckles the Echidna stretched their legs and eyed the trails down the mountain that overlooked their home of Green Hills, Montana.

"By the way, are you sure you guys want to race me? I'm the fastest creature in the universe. It's kind of my whole brand," joked Sonic, tilting his head behind him to crack his back.

"We'll see about that," called Tails with a smirk.

"It is my destiny to claim the throne of family champion," Knuckles growled and beat one of his huge fists into the ground.

"Once again, not an official title, but I respect the confidence, buddy." Sonic laughed.

Ahead of the trio, Sonic's parents Tom and Maddie Wachowski straddled either side of the official race starting line. "Don't worry," Tom, affectionately known as Donut Lord, said to his wife. "A little sibling rivalry is healthy. Me and my brothers used to do this kind of thing all the time."

“Tom, your brothers are lunatics.” Maddie raised an eyebrow. “And neither was born with the power to trigger a global cataclysmic event.”

“Fair point,” Tom said. “Hear that, boys? No cataclysmic events! You got me?”

“10-4! You got it! Understood, Lord of the Donuts!” the boys called back.

Maddie raised an arm and called out, “On your mark, get set, g—”

As soon as the sound waves of Maddie’s *o* split the air, Sonic took off in the blink of an eye. Sonic was already tearing a path through the woods while the shockwaves from his speeding quills shredded the vegetation all around them. It was almost too easy.

Sonic called behind him in his most official sports announcer tone. “And way out in front—to the surprise of absolutely no one—it’s the Blue Blur, the Red-Shoed Rocket, the one and only…”

“C’mon, Sonic! Catch up!” called a familiar voice from the sky. With a buzzing whip of his helicopter hind end, Tails shot out ahead.

“What the what?!?” Sonic shouted. Could the fox be using his latest technological creation to boost his speed? That would be cheating!

“I am also defeating you, hedgehog!” crowed the gruff voice of the electric red echidna as Knuckles burst into view out in front. How could he even do that? The guy’s hands alone added twenty pounds on his frame!

“Seriously?” Sonic called after the pair. “All right…time to light the afterburners!”

Digging his toes deeper into the dirt, Sonic shot down the rocky terrain of the forest like an F-15 jet. “Look!” he cried. “It’s a bird, it’s a plane, it’s…Air Hedgehog!” Then with an athletic leap, he executed his signature spin dash and blasted down the mountainside as a ball of quills crackling with electric blue energy. Within seconds, Sonic had slapped the sign that marked the finish, leaving it spinning like a weather vane.

“Yes!” Sonic cheered as he slid into a victory dance. “I did it! I did it! I…lost?!”

Four feet in front of him, Tails and Knuckles stood with triumphant looks on their faces.

“I am also defeating you, hedgehog!” Knuckles bragged again in the same gruff tone.

“Okay, okay, I get it, man,” Sonic said. “No need to rub it in.”

“C’mon, Sonic! Catch up!” Tails repeated, hovering just off the ground.

“Wait a minute. What’s going on?” Sonic walked toward them with an eyebrow raised. “Why are you guys acting like…holograms?” The hedgehog waved a gloved hand through the faces of his best pals, and their intangible images glitched just for a moment. Another one of Tails’ inventions no doubt. “This means I remain the undefeated speed champion of all time, yes! But also—what is going on?”

*Whoooooosh!*

In half the time it took him to go down the mountain, Sonic raced back up to their campsite and skidded short into the clearing to find his family waiting for him. “Surprise!” they called out in unison, and Sonic saw that their campsite and tents now included a shimmering set of party streamers and a large cake.

“Wait a minute,” Sonic said. “The race was just a distraction—which I totally didn’t fall for by the way, good try, though—so you guys could throw a party for me?”

“You got it, pal.” Tom smiled from under a party hat. “Today’s the anniversary of the day you came to Earth. It’s your Earth Day Birthday!”

“Or *Bearthday* for short!” said Maddie as she unfurled a “Happy Bearthday!” banner above their picnic table.

“Today, we honor you, hedgehog,” said Knuckles.

“That’s right,” Tom agreed. “The day you came to this planet was the day all our lives changed forever.”

“And our family became possible.” Maddie stooped down to give him a hug.

Sonic was overwhelmed with warm feelings and, for once in his life, he was *almost* speechless. “Aw, you guys. I don’t know what to say except—LET’S PARTY!”

The gang sat down for a typical Wachowski family barbecue, which of course was not so typical by Earth standards. There were tons of chili for the hot dogs, piles upon piles of green grapes, and way too much birthday cake for any human to consume. But this crew didn’t do anything like humans.

“You know, Sonic,” Tom said, “I didn’t realize it when we booked the spot, but this is a celebration of your Bearthday in more ways than one.”

“Are they going to throw a parade in my honor, too?” Sonic laughed.

“No, but we’re not far from the place where you said you made your stomping grounds before we found you. See any familiar sights?”

“Wait.” The implication dawned on Sonic. “That means…”

*Whoooosh!*

In a heartbeat, Sonic had soared up the ridge and to a place that had once been his only home on the planet. He drank it in for a long moment. Behind him, Sonic heard the crunch of gravel under boots. It was Tom. “Whoa…Sonic, it’s…”

“My old cave,” he said wistfully. So much of his stuff was still here. The busted Ping-Pong table. The corroded boom box. Even a few less-than-mint-condition *Speed Demon* comics. But they weren’t the most important thing. Sonic tore down the vines that had grown over the wall to reveal his mural. It was sketchy and faded—he did it when he was a kid, after all—but it was all he could remember of his home world. There was a field of stars representing all of galactic civilization (or what he knew of it then), the rough shape of a loop-de-loop where he had honed his speed…and finally two figures standing hand in hand with big toothy smiles beaming out. One was Sonic, and the other one was an owl—Longclaw. Sonic’s mother.

“I drew that when I first got to Earth,” Sonic explained. “To always remember where I came from.” And he had never forgotten. Even after Tom stopped being “Donut Lord” to him and became “Dad.” Even after two earth-shattering battles with the insane Eggman better known as Dr. Robotnik. Even after adventures that spanned the globe and back again. He never stopped thinking about his original home or the mother who helped him escape to Earth.

“I can’t believe this cave is where you lived all those years,” Tom said. “It’s really proof of how much things have changed. How much you’ve grown. How much you’ve lost.”

“I still miss her. Do you think Longclaw would be proud of me?”

“I *know* she would be, pal. Because even though you lost her at such a young age, you made a choice back then—to never let that change who you are inside.” Tom tapped a finger on Sonic’s chest.

“In my lungs?” The hedgehog broke his reverie.

“In your heart.” His dad laughed. “That’s the thing about life, Sonic. It’s all about the choices we make. And as you grow up, you’ll make some good ones, and you’ll probably make a few bad ones along the way.”

“Like that time I ate three dozen chili dogs and caused irreparable damage to the plumbing system?”

“What?” Tom said before Sonic shrugged it off. “Look, what I’m trying to say is as long as you stay true to who you are inside, you’ll make the right choices when it matters most.”

“I will, Dad. I promise.”

Just then, the air above Green Hills swirled with the sound of chopper blades. And they were headed right for the family’s campground.

“Who’s flying a helicopter here?” Sonic said.

Tom looked to the sky. “Military.”

*Whoooooooosh!*

Sonic zoomed back to the campsite to find a fully armed unit of soldiers staring them down. Each human was dressed in the all-black gear of the Guardian Units of Nations—an international law enforcement organization ridiculously known as G.U.N. that had been tracking Sonic since he made himself known on Earth. And at their lead was a fierce-looking woman with jet-black hair. She was new, and Sonic didn’t like her vibe, to be honest. They stared each other down for a tense moment.

“Mr. and Mrs. Wachowski,” the woman said as Tom joined them. Then with a terse nod to Sonic and his pals, she acknowledged them. “Aliens.”

“Aliens?” Sonic paced around her with a cocked eyebrow. “Rude. We have names!”

“I’m aware,” the woman said. “They’re short, strange, and in some cases directly related to your body parts.” She took off her sunglasses and shot a flat stare at them. “I’m G.U.N. Director Rockwell. I’ve been sent by Commander Walters. There’s a dangerous situation unfolding in Tokyo right now involving a super-powered alien. One much like yourselves. Walters is requesting Team Sonic’s immediate assistance.”

“Team *Sonic*?” Knuckles butted in. “Who picked that name?”

“Love it. Ten out of ten. No notes,” said Sonic. “And wait…there’s *another* alien like us out there?”

“Lucky for Earth, right?” Rockwell said in a deadpan voice. “Follow me. We need to leave. *Right now*.” Sonic looked back to Tom and Maddie, who stepped forward with the rest of the team. But Rockwell blocked their path. “I’m sorry,” she said. “No civilians.”

“Hey!” Sonic shot back. “If they don’t go, none of us do!”

Tom brought Sonic, Tails, and Knuckles in for a family huddle. “Look, buddy, this is your call,” he said. “But for what it’s worth, we think you guys can handle anything thrown at you.” Maddie agreed, and as Sonic looked around the circle, he could tell that his two best friends were as ready for action as ever.

“All right,” Sonic told Rockwell. “We’re in.”

Sonic knew the risks. He’d lost a home once and a parent, too. So, no matter what danger lay ahead, he wouldn’t lose anymore.

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# CHAPTER 2

The lights of Tokyo's Shibuya Crossing rose up in every direction. Towering television screens flared on countless skyscrapers, projecting hot pink advertisements into the stormy sky. And on the wet streets, the glare from the red tops of the rapidly approaching police cars was inescapable. The alien life-form in the middle of it all squinted in the searing light. The colors hurt his eyes.

But Shadow the Hedgehog knew that all this flash only covered up a darkness underneath.

"Creature! Stand down and submit to apprehension!" called a stilted voice over a loudspeaker. The police seemed afraid of Shadow. They were right to be.

*Slish!*

Like a rolling blackout, the dark trail of Shadow's body cut a semicircle in front of the police line. His legs weren't moving as fast as they once did. He missed his roller skates. But he was speedy enough to slosh dirty gutter water over his adversaries and drive them back. Still, his muscles ached as he skidded to a halt.

How long had it been? Months? Years? Decades even?

Once upon a time, Shadow's life had been a happy one. He had been born in a lab and only saw creatures that looked nothing like him. But he had Maria, and she was enough. The young girl showed him the stars and that a world existed outside his lab. She shared the beauty of music and the meaning of fun. But it was not meant to last. Because Shadow's guardians —his captors, really—could not let them live in peace.

"WALTERS!" Shadow screamed into the Tokyo sky. "Show yourself, you coward!"

All around him, the now soggy police shifted uneasily, but Shadow's true nemesis was nowhere in sight. As the hedgehog's anger grew, his power began returning to him as well. He could feel the thrilling shock of unpredictable energy crackle through his muscles and out of his quills.

Yes, he had been hidden underground for years. That much was clear. The traitor Walters and his goons had trapped Shadow in cryo-freeze—keeping him in suspended animation until they found someone else who could steal his power from him. But that was over now. Only twenty-four hours ago, his long nightmare had ended. The glass of Shadow's cage had shattered, and he had made easy work of the guards sent to contain him.

Shadow had been liberated. One man was responsible for the freedom he now possessed, and his ancient, oily voice rang in Shadow's head. "Lovely to see you again…have you missed me?" Shadow had not. But at least he had one man he could place his trust in on his quest for revenge. For now.

"Freeze!"

A second wave of soldiers appeared, surrounding Shibuya Crossing. They creeped and clawed their way out of the corners of this strange city. Did they think they could sneak up on Shadow? It was impossible, but when he heard the roar of engines and saw the dark-clad brutes on their two-wheeled attack vehicles, he knew where they were from. G.U.N. had arrived. The fools.

"Under the authorization of the Guardian Units of Nations, I order you to stand down and submit to arrest!" a masked captain yelled.

"I have no quarrel with you, little man," Shadow snarled in reply. "Bring me your leader or face the consequences."

"Soldiers…on my mark…" The captain raised his hand as the red laser sights of a dozen high-tech weapons zeroed in on Shadow's shimmering black fur.

"Have it your way," Shadow said. Whether Walters was with them or not, his vengeance would begin here.

*Vrooooom!*

A cycle sped through the clearing and tried to clip Shadow's shoulder… but missed. Soon two more joined, each rider carrying long batons charged with energy. He was only glad to show them what real energy could do.

*Swack!* He pulled one rider off and swung his limp body overhead. *Crack!* The soldier collided with his compatriot and collapsed in a wet pile of tangled limbs. *Vroooooom!* But the final rider kept his distance. He hoped to trip up Shadow with his long reach, perhaps. A foolish gesture.

*Glitch!*

In a snap, Shadow had disappeared from the center of the road and rematerialized on the back of the last cycle. He began clubbing its pilot with the man's own baton. Once the bike skidded out, the hedgehog swiftly turned back to the street and saw the fallen rider struggle to his feet. They stood for a moment, face-to-face, before the man cut on a dime and sprinted toward the alley. A smart move.

"Do you see the futile nature of your efforts now?" Shadow called to the nervous remainder of men. "All I ask is for your leader! I hear you call him 'Commander' now! But all he will command in the end is the attention of my fists! I repeat: Where is Walters?!"

*Chook!*

A bright floodlight shone right where Shadow stood. He could not see, but even in this blistering beam, he was at home. This was how it felt when he was awoken, and he always knew that where there was light, someone hid behind it.

When this new floodlight rolled toward him on thundering black tires, he felt no fear from the G.U.N. heavy assault vehicle. No tank could drive him from his purpose. And it certainly couldn't protect them from his power.

"Chaos…" Shadow raised an arm to the sky and gathered all the energy he could in his chest. "Control!!!" With a steamy crackle in the air, he moved instantaneously from in front of the assault vehicle into the heart of its engine and then back again. No harm would befall Shadow with this move. But as for the vehicle…

*KABOOM!*

The blaze from the exploding truck sent the G.U.N. crew scattering. That would teach them what they were facing. That would begin to show all these accursed humans what they had tried to hide away in the dark. Yet if Shadow was forced to fight to make them see, there was only one enemy he wanted to lay his hands on.

"Walters!" he cried again in anguish. "Where is Walters?!?"

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# CHAPTER 3

Tails adjusted the heavy headphones to fit his pointy ears. The fox checked the dashboard of complicated instruments and then slowly maneuvered the behemoth Chinook helicopter out over the skyline. Human tech was still centuries behind the kind of things the galactic animal civilization that he had grown up in could produce, but boy did Tails find this stuff *fun*.

"Good evening and welcome to Tails Air, Flight 1012," he spoke into the headset mic. "We're looking at an on-time arrival into Tokyo, and for those of you who have adventured with us before, you *will* be earning frequent flyer miles!"

In the bowels of the chopper, Sonic and Knuckles held on amid a group of G.U.N. agents and their newest leader. "This is the lowest moment of my professional career," Rockwell grumbled, her head in her hands.

"Lighten up, lady," Sonic said with his feet propped up and hands behind his head. "You should consider it an honor to lead my personal adventure escort."

Good ol' Sonic, always ready with a joke. Tails looked up to the hedgehog more than it was acceptable to admit. But working with your hero was always payment enough to make him happy. The fox just hoped he could contribute something to the team that no one else could.

Take G.U.N. and their schemes, for example. Sonic and the Wachowskis hadn't even known that the secretive international organization was watching them when he first connected with the people of Green Hills. But since Tails arrived, he'd been building an arsenal of information on the Guardian Units of Nations. He reverse engineered the device they'd left at the family house to better understand their communications systems. He kept every scrap of blaster, badge, or metal that they'd left behind after the

big fight with Dr. Robotnik in Green Hills last year. And at that very moment, he had plugged his Miles Electric Device into their attack helicopter and was using it to download as many secrets as he could from their servers.

“You don’t like us, do you?” Sonic teased Rockwell from the back. Keep going, buddy. Keep her distracted.

“Don’t take it personally,” the woman explained. “I hate all aliens equally. But you specifically, I don’t *trust*. You still refuse to reveal the location of the Master Emerald. And *no one* can be trusted with a weapon that powerful.”

“We completely agree!” Sonic said. “That’s why it’s Knucks’ job to keep it safe and hidden at all times.”

“I swore a sacred oath to protect the Emerald from *anyone* who might abuse its powers.” Knuckles crossed his arms, proud and bold.

“And FYI, he takes his sacred oaths super sacredly,” Tails called back from the pilot’s seat.

“Look, this cuddly ‘Stuffed Animals with Superpowers’ act may work on Walters, but it doesn’t work on me. I think you’re reckless, dangerous, and completely unqualified to be here in the field.”

“But you just met me.” Sonic playfully pouted. “Normally, it takes someone hours to realize I’m not qualified to be here.”

“The idea of G.U.N. agents being ‘qualified’ for battle is laughable,” Knuckles said, bristling. Just months ago, he’d had a run-in with two rogue members of Rockwell’s organization who tried to steal his power for their own nefarious purposes. “Your ranks lack honor, but at the very least, their failure to capture this alien gives us the opportunity to test our mettle.” Knuckles stood up and paced the length of the hold.

“Okay, everybody,” Tails called back. “I think we’re clear enough from town that we can cut this trip short.” In truth, the fox didn’t need the extra airspace to maneuver the helicopter through a golden ring portal. He’d been using them since he was little, and only under rare circumstances did he have trouble opening a portal to where he wanted to go. But now his download of G.U.N. files was complete, and it was time to toss out the ring and make their portal to Tokyo.

*Zam!*

“Finally! Some action!” Knuckles cheered as the gateway opened in front of them.

“Just in case, you may want to carry a few of these,” Tails said, tossing back a handful of compact metal cubes. Once they landed in the echidna’s massive hands, the cubes unfolded into a pair of superstrong manacles. “Titanium handcuffs,” the fox explained. “Completely indestructible.”

“I don’t need your silly gizmos, fox.” Knuckles tossed the devices aside. “And do you know why? Because…”

“Because you’re one million percent muscle,” both Tails and Sonic said in unison.

“Yes, good. You have been listening.”

“We’re over the drop zone now!” a G.U.N. officer declared as the running lights of the helicopter’s interior flashed from red to green.

“Thanks for the loan,” said Tails, handing the craft’s stick over to the pilot. He’d learned a lot from the experience. More than they’d ever know.

As the chopper swung low over the glittering Tokyo skyline, Team Sonic gathered near the side door, which swung open, letting in a rush of night air. Tails watched as the G.U.N. crew leaned back uneasily, but not even a five-hundred-foot drop would shake Sonic’s nerve. The trio of heroes leaned over the city, and Tails couldn’t help but smile at the thrilling prospect of an all-new adventure.

“Look, we don’t know if it’s Godzilla or Hello Kitty down there,” Sonic said. “But as long as we stick together, there’s nothing we can’t handle.”

“All that leaves is the task of finding this rogue,” Knuckles said.

*KABOOM!*

“Well then, maybe we should follow the giant fireball?” asked Tails as the glow from an explosion in a central Tokyo crossing flashed across their faces even from this great distance.

“Looks like it’s go time,” Sonic said. “Team Sonic on three?”

Tails checked his gear as he counted, “One! Two! Three!”

“TEAM KNUCKLES!!” the echidna called as he leaped from the helicopter and glided down toward the city in his signature style.

“It’s okay. We’re going to get that one back.” Sonic laughed before his red shoes revved up in an infinity spin and launched his electric blue form into the sky below.

Alone at the edge, Tails looked back at Director Rockwell. “It doesn’t matter if you like him or trust him,” the fox explained. “Sonic is still going to save the day because he’s a hero, and that’s what heroes do. Something you people should consider for yourselves.”

And with that, Tails buzzed off into the air, his twin spinning tails carrying him along faster than the vehicle could ever go. Whoever this new alien was, he was no match for Team Sonic. Tails was sure of it.

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# CHAPTER 4

Sonic's shimmering form unrolled as he and his friends slid into the crossing where they'd seen the explosion. What was left on the scene was ugly.

"What happened here?" his angry red ally said in a rare moment of surprise.

"Looks like G.U.N. got their butts kicked," Sonic said. "Keep your eyes open. Tails, anything on your end?"

"Whoa!" the young fox called, hovering behind them with his yellow Miles Electric Device in hand. "These energy readings are off the charts!"

"Look out!"

Sonic leaped toward Tails as a massive military vehicle rolled directly at them. Even at his speed, the thing was bearing down on them until…

*Crunch!*

"One. Million. Percent. Muscle." Knuckles bragged and flexed amid the ruins of the vehicle he'd just split apart with one punch.

"So I've been told." Sonic laughed, but something didn't feel right. The fastest thing alive shouldn't have been so close to getting squashed like a bug under a boot, right? What was powerful enough to move a piece of machinery that big at that speed?

"Wait," Tails said as the smoke thinned out in the crossing ahead. "Is that…?"

"Another hedgehog!" Knuckles completed the unthinkable thought.

"No way," Sonic said, more to himself than anyone else. "He looks just like me."

They could have been brothers. Whoever this guy was, he was the same size and same build as Sonic. He even had the same keen fashion sense to style up his head quills in a way that said "Yes, I am this cool. Thank you

for noticing.” Yet there was something darker in this character as well. It wasn’t just his black fur or the way he crackled with raging red energy. (Something Sonic totally wasn’t jealous of, okay?) It was that in this hedgehog’s eyes there was a real pain—something beyond anger he was using to smash everything in sight. It was like he’d lost a piece of his own heart.

But that didn’t matter in the end. Sonic had built a family in a world where he was a feared alien. He’d built a team of allies with other lost souls like him. He could find a way through to this hedgehog. No one was beyond saving.

“We don’t have to fight this guy,” Sonic called over his shoulder as he walked toward the chaotic scene. “Let me just go talk to him.”

“Sonic? I don’t think…” Tails’ voice trailed off, but Sonic knew what the situation called for. It was time for him to pull out the old Wachowski charm.

“Welcome to Earth, fellow hedgehog!” he said with a relaxed smile. “Listen, I know how you’re feeling right now. New planet. All alone. The next thing you know, half the city’s on fire. Trust me, I’ve been there…”

“Where is Walters?” the hedgehog growled, leveling Sonic with a look that could curdle milk.

“Walters?”

“The commander of the lying cowards of G.U.N.!”

This didn’t quite add up. If this guy knew Walters, what else could G.U.N. not be sharing? “Knowing that guy, he’s probably at a chain Italian place loading up on unlimited breadsticks.” Sonic tried to put his counterpart at ease. “But maybe I can take a message?”

“Walk away,” the shadowy one growled. “Before you and your little friends get hurt.”

Okay, that was not an ideal reply. Still, Sonic could keep this under control, he was sure.

“Oh, it’s a fight you want, new hedgehog?” Knuckles called, pounding one fist into his palm in preparation.

“Hold on, Knuckles…we’re just talking—” But Sonic’s plea came too late.

The echidna let a shiver of red energy curl up his arm and threw a powerful punch as he cried, “Let us talk with our fists!!”

The punch never landed. Even as Knuckles swung hard, Sonic saw the other hedgehog…glitch somehow? In an instant, the guy shivered in a shadowy blur and somehow materialized on Knuckles' weak side. He even balled up the echidna warrior like a wad of paper. And that was Knuckles' whole signature deal!

*Swak-swak-swak-swak-swak-CRASH!*

Their adversary let loose on the echidna with a flurry of punches, finally tossing Team Sonic's enforcer through a storefront window. Sonic and Tails rushed to their friend's side. Luckily it appeared his ego was bruised more than anything.

"Might be…a little…rusty," he mumbled as they pulled him to his feet.

"Who *is* this guy?" Sonic said as they watched the shadowy figure stalk angrily through the debris toward them.

"He is *much* more impressive than the hedgehog I fought previously," Knuckles said.

"You mean me?"

"Yes."

Sonic chose to ignore that for the moment. "Well, whoever he is, he can't take us all at once."

Yet the other hedgehog seemed to have a different plan in mind. He stomped toward the trio with a vengeful look in his eye and said, "You were warned. Now I'm going to make this *hurt*."

Before Sonic could even think, the adversary glitched again—suddenly appearing behind Sonic and grabbing him by the scruff of the neck. A fiery sound like a rocket taking off flashed, and in a blur, Sonic was raised fifty feet into the air. Then just as quickly, the other hedgehog spun him around midair and threw the hero to the ground. *Hard*.

*Crunk!*

Pavement cracked beneath Sonic's body, and he felt pain rattle from his toes to his teeth. He tried to stand, but even the cushion of static electricity his own powers generated couldn't soften such a blow. The impact of his body even blew Tails and Knuckles backward. Sonic stumbled to his knees.

"If you want to keep breathing, stay out of my way," called the hedgehog as he climbed onto an abandoned G.U.N. motorcycle, drawing up an energy pistol off the street as he did so. With a roar of the engine and peeling tires, the hedgehog spun away into the city.

“Okay…just a little light jog then,” Sonic wearily joked as he steadied himself into a racing stance. “If this guy wants to play a game of speed, he doesn’t know who he’s facing.”

“Sonic, chasing him is a bad idea,” said Tails.

“And when has that ever stopped me?”

*Whoooooosh!*

The world melted away. Tokyo’s colors became laser lines in a tunnel of speed as Sonic poured on his hardest sprint. Soon, the whirlwind of light was joined by the bright blue flaring of Sonic’s own chaotic energy as he pursued the hedgehog. There weren’t many creatures in the universe who knew what a speed like this looked like. Or what it felt like. But this dark twin of Sonic’s seemed experienced as he urged his motorcycle on, crackling with power of his own.

“Hey, where are you going?” Sonic called. “We forgot to trade email addresses!”

*Choom! Choom!*

The hedgehog aimed his G.U.N. blaster and fired off a few bursts that whizzed past Sonic’s quills. The guy meant business, but Sonic had dealt with worse. He’d outrun an army of Robotnik’s drones. A little laser fire couldn’t stop him. With a quick step, Sonic spun himself into a ball and blasted his way directly at the motorcycle. And he missed!

Ricocheting off the pavement on the far side of the street, Sonic saw his foe materialize back where he’d launched from. So, it wasn’t a glitch that this character used. He was teleporting somehow!

“Hey, no cheat codes!” Sonic called before speeding up next to the hedgehog. “Look, I think we got off on the wrong foot. Let’s start over. Hi, I’m Sonic. I like puppies, the music of Billy Joel, and fast runs on the beach…”

“The only thing that runs fast on you is your mouth!” the other hedgehog growled before yanking the handlebars of his bike hard and speeding the cycle up the side of a skyscraper. It was honestly a pretty cool move. Yet Sonic could keep pace and go into attack mode.

They both flew up the glass side of the building. Sonic would swing a fist meant to delay the dark one only to see him barely flinch. The hedgehog would blast back with his blaster, only for Sonic to dodge and duck like a champ. After each electric step or screeching wheel spin, the only thing

either of them succeeded in beating was the force of gravity. They were just too evenly matched.

There was nothing left to do but go full force. Maybe if Sonic hit him with everything he had, the hedgehog would falter. Sonic sped up, leaping into the sky above for a final blast as his foe abandoned his bike and charged up for a similar desperate shot. The world seemed to go slow motion as they careened toward a collision.

*CHOOOOOOM!*

Sonic hit the landing atop the skyscraper like a ragdoll as everything around him went black. The shockwave of their fight spread out for miles. Across Tokyo, the neon lights died out. The towering buildings turned dark. Even the clouds in the sky seemed to obscure the moon, covering the world in one giant shadow.

Sonic had done this once before, when he first arrived on Earth. But this time the blackout left him vulnerable to the hedgehog who loomed over him. Couldn't *anything* slow this guy down?

"I gave you a chance to get out of here alive," the angry voice spat. "If you were smart, you would have taken it!"

"And if you were smart, you'd stop with that fake growly voice." Sonic stood his ground. "The whole grim and gritty thing is about a decade out of style, pal."

"Enough!"

But with a raised fist hanging above for a crushing final blow, the other hedgehog paused. He seemed disgusted with Sonic. "Learn your lesson well, fool!" he growled. "You are not my prey tonight, but if we ever cross paths again, I will not be so forgiving." And with a quick jerk of his hands, the other hedgehog slapped a pair of razor-sharp cuffs around Sonic's wrists, immobilizing him.

With a final fleeting glitch, the hedgehog teleported away. And Sonic was alone.

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# CHAPTER 5

Being defeated in battle by an enemy unknown to you was a grievous insult to any proper warrior. As if this wasn't embarrassing enough already, now Knuckles had to suffer the indignity of licking his wounds in a play place for human children. All about him, soft pudding-like costumed servers toddled this way and that with legs far too small for their bodies and eyes far too big for their heads. He would have greatly preferred a vineyard of grapes.

"What is this unholy place?" he said as the little creatures offered them menus.

"It's called the Chao Garden!" Tails spoke up, overly enthusiastic as ever. "One of the top ten must-see spots in all of Tokyo. These mascots represent fantastical childlike spirits. So, it's a perfect place for us to blend in!"

Knuckles was not at all blending in. He was a warrior, born and bred. He had captured the Flames of Disaster from the fire demon Iblis. He had bested the Scavengers and their behemoth crustacean in the parlor of Casino Nights. He had even recaptured the Master Emerald from the vile charlatan Robotnik…Sonic and Tails' help notwithstanding. So, no. Knuckles did not blend in in this garden of cute.

"Oh, how cuuuuuuute!" a tourist beamed before snapping a selfie with the trio of heroes. Alas, Knuckles' indignity knew no end.

At last, the bells of the Chao Garden Café's door rang and brought a familiar face to their conclave. The elder statesman of G.U.N.—Commander Walters, of espionage tactics and breadstick cravings—entered.

"Sonic!" the old man cried, once again placing too much attention on the hedgehog. "Thank goodness you're all okay. I regret that I wasn't able

to properly brief you before the mission, but it was an emergency. I'm sure you have questions."

"A competing hedgehog has arrived with powers untold," Knuckles said. "The only question is how soon until I can best him in battle and reclaim my honor."

Sonic raised a finger in the air. "Actually, I have a few more questions besides that one," he said. "Like, who was this guy? What's his deal? Why does he hate you so much? And what intel can we get about him besides him being black, red, and really ticked off?"

Walters cleared his throat. "Well, to begin…his name is Shadow."

"That tracks," Tails said, nodding.

"Great. Shadow the Hedgehog. Totally not infringing on my copyright." Sonic rolled his eyes. "Please don't tell me he's some kind of top secret military project."

"Shadow was a top secret military project."

"Gah! Why don't you guys ever learn?!"

Walters shook his head, clearly struggling with his own disgrace. "Project Shadow was a mistake," he explained. "I've spent most of my life regretting it. You see, Shadow's story began a lot like yours, Sonic. But where you found family and friends on this planet…Shadow found only pain and loss."

"Where did he come from?" Tails inquired.

"No one knows exactly. Fifty years ago, a meteorite crashed on Earth." Walters took a laptop out and booted up a series of grainy security videos. "Perhaps it's best if I showed you."

On the screen, images of a smoldering crater cut in and out. At its heart, a glowing meteorite throbbed with energy—the kind of interplanetary transit Knuckles had only heard of in legends. An assembly of G.U.N. agents in black suits and shades took readings while an old farmer shook his head in disbelief.

"The country's top scientific minds were called in to study the crash site," Walters continued. "And soon, a brilliant scientist made a remarkable discovery. The meteorite contained a life-form. The *ultimate* life-form." On-screen, they could make out the outline of this new hedgehog floating in a laboratory tank, pieces of meteorite dissolving around his sleeping body. He looked nothing like an ultimate life-form to Knuckles. But what was

suspicious was the lead scientist in the video, standing in the shadows with only a long, twisting mustache clearly visible.

The images on-screen flickered ahead to a series of videos where the now revived Shadow was tested in feats of physical strength. Knuckles watched him run, jump, and pump out energy in a not unimpressive manner. Walters continued to explain. “Shadow’s power—his ‘chaos energy’ as you would call it—went far beyond any living creature’s. The scientist who discovered him believed this power would usher in a new era for mankind, creating breakthroughs in clean energy or medicine…even in time manipulation.”

“Time manipulation?” Tails exclaimed. “That must be how he appears to move so fast.”

“Precisely,” the commander agreed. “Shadow’s chaos energy allows him to bend time—jumping from one moment to another in short bursts.”

“Time jumps? Pfffft.” Sonic rolled his eyes. “So, he’s not even really running! Fake hedgehog. I’m totally faster.”

On the screen, one final run of footage presented itself. Shadow was no longer in a controlled environment. It showed a massive explosion that ripped a hole through the lab. “A terrible accident destroyed the lab, the experiment…everything,” Walters said gravely. “Human lives were lost. And I had no choice but to imprison the scientist whose reckless experiments had led to the tragedy.” The commander clapped the laptop shut. “Shadow himself was deemed too dangerous to go free and placed in cryo-freeze, where he remained for the past half a century.”

“Fifty years on ice is no fate for a warrior,” Knuckles said, bristling at Walters’ dispassionate expression.

“Well, that era ended today. Somehow, Shadow escaped and tracked me here to Tokyo, where I was attending the G.U.N. global defense conference.”

Knuckles and his pair of compatriots stood in silence, contemplating the remarkable story. Then suddenly, they realized they were not alone. In a semicircle behind them, the stuffed mascot creatures called Chao were leaning in for more. It was undignified.

“Do you mind?!” Sonic leaped up and began to push them toward the kitchen. “This is a private conversation! C’mon, shoo!” As the group of colorful creatures retreated, the hedgehog began to pace in front of Walters.

“So if Shadow’s been on ice for fifty years, there’s no way he’d be able to track you on his own. He must be working with someone.”

“Indeed he is, Sonic.” Walters was as serious as Knuckles had ever seen the man. “And I think I know who. This may sound impossible, but I believe Shadow is working with…”

But in that brief moment, the window of the tiny theme restaurant was flooded with a dozen red laser lights. They were being targeted, and only the hedgehog could stay a split second ahead of whatever danger was zeroing in.

“Everyone, get down!!” Sonic screamed right as the window exploded with fury.

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# CHAPTER 6

Sonic had learned so much since coming to Earth. He learned the value of nutrition, like how sometimes you have to put onions on your chili dog. He learned the value of patience, like how sometimes it was appropriate to wait 4.7 seconds before opening a present. And of course, he learned the value of appreciating the beauty of your surroundings, like how the Chao Garden Café light glittered off the dozen ballistic missiles that were bursting through the front window at that very moment.

Luckily for all assembled, when such dangerous circumstances arose, Sonic had a talent. His whole body could engage in hyperspeed. Every quill tingled with chaotic energy to the point that the world around him seemed to slow to a standstill. He couldn't help but appreciate the way the light hit these deadly weapons, even if it wasn't the most appropriate time to do it.

But now it was time for action. With the room frozen in place, Sonic leaped over the table. It was like swimming through a bowl of gelatin at this speed, but with effort he was able to kick one red sneaker into Commander Walters' side and knock the old man from the path of danger. Reaching out with his gloved fists, Sonic tossed a few of the still-gathered Chao mascots to the floor. It was a shame no one could clearly see how dashing and heroic he was being.

*Whhuuuuuuush!*

With the throbbing sound of a subwoofer, Knuckles grabbed hold of a missile and spun it back the way it came. And Sonic could see Tails, too, rising over his shoulder to deflect another projectile. His pals weren't nearly as fast as the hedgehog, of course, but their own bursts of speed meant that these three were the only hope the restaurant patrons had for survival.

What followed was a split-second frenzy of Team Sonic's collective power. Neon lights from the city flooded through the window as each hero

took on a handful of missiles before they could blow up. It was kind of like a dance party.

Up near the ceiling, Tails had looped a lasso gizmo around two missiles and was swinging them around like a bucking bronco. The weapons' jet-fire may have lit the heads of a few Chao aflame, but that was fixable! To the right, Knuckles was beating back bomb after bomb with his massive fists. And sure, they were mostly exploding in the air, shaking the rest of the building's load-bearing pillars. But this place was probably insured for that! Sonic himself flipped back and forth a few times to swat the last missiles out of the window even as he watched his friends. Their slo-mo strategy had to be enough to save the day. They'd gotten all of the explosives, right?

*KA-POW!*

With a fiery force, one last missile landed in the center of the room and blew everyone left to the ground. Sonic felt its force, and the world snapped back to normal speed as he hit the wall on the far side of the café. He looked up through the smoke in fear. But through the haze, it seemed that both Knuckles and Tails were battered yet stable. The Chao mascots and customers had escaped only mildly traumatized. That only left…

"Walters!" Sonic rushed to the side of the collapsed secret agent. "Commander Walters? Are you okay?!"

"Ugghhh…" The old man's voice was weak and raspy.

"Hedgehog!" Knuckles called out. "Prepare for battle! A second wave has arrived."

Sonic turned to see a small fleet of his worst nightmare: egg drones! The gleaming, airborne robotic assistants of his nemesis Dr. Robotnik. But Robotnik was dead…wasn't he?

"Uh…Sonic? Any plan here?" Tails nervously turned around as the red laser sights of the egg drones zeroed in on their bodies.

Sonic rose to his feet with a stumble. They were all still feeling the pain of the explosion, but that was no excuse to lie down on the job. "We're going to have to suck 'em up in a whirlwind," he said as his friends nodded. "On my mark…three…two…"

*Vrooooom!*

With a roar, a black motorcycle under the command of a mystery rider jumped over the debris and circled the trio. The egg drones scattered at its arrival, giving the rider just enough time to flick out a handful of tiny

devices from his wrist. Each coin-size contraption attached itself to a drone, and before Sonic could say “one,” each enemy robot shuddered with a burst of electricity and fell to the ground.

“Solid!” Tails said enthusiastically. “A miniaturized electromagnetic pulse. Impressive tech!”

The rider leaned his bike low to the ground. With a small multi-tool, he expertly unscrewed the top plate from an egg drone and reached into its circuitry to pull out a thin black drive.

“Yeah, hi.” Sonic approached the rider cautiously and tried to get a look under the onyx shade of his helmet. “Thanks for saving our buns back there, but who—”

*Vrooooom!*

And with that one rev on the handlebar, the motorcycle and their unknown savior were back through the broken window and speeding down the city street.

“Quickly!” Knuckles cried. “Follow that motored cycle!”

But for once, Sonic wasn’t willing to rush headfirst into the unknown. Because now there was someone he felt responsible for lying on the ground. Ugh. Responsibility? Is this what Tom and Maddie were always going on about? It did *not* feel all that great.

“We can’t just leave Walters!” Sonic shouted after his departing friends. But then the old man came to.

“Sonic,” he said weakly as he pulled what looked like a small leather wallet out of his suit coat. It was emblazoned with an orange kind of half-moon logo. No, that wasn’t a moon. It was an eclipse. “Take this,” Walters commanded. “You’re the only one who can keep it safe. It’s what Shadow wants. A key to the most powerful weapon G.U.N. has ever built. If he gets it, all life on Earth could be threatened.”

Sonic stared at the device. “Sonic, you have to stop him before he hurts others,” Walters choked out and then went unconscious on the café floor. Yeah, this was definitely the kind of responsibility Sonic was looking to avoid.

On the ground, a radio receiver had fallen from Walters’ pocket and crackled to life with the voice of the woman who’d brought them here, Director Rockwell. She sounded super mean and bossy, but like, not in the cool girl-boss way. “Alert to all G.U.N. units. The Commander is MIA, and

I am ordering an immediate Capture or Kill order on *all* alien creatures," she said. "None of the animals can be trusted. Repeat: Capture or Kill!"

If that was how it was going to be, Sonic was going to show them all a better way of being. But first, they had to get some cover.

"What is your delay?" Knuckles asked impatiently at the corner. "Were you not the self-christened 'Fastest Thing Alive'?"

"First off, still am." Sonic smiled. "Secondly, put these on. We need cover because our mystery man isn't the only dangerous force out there." He threw his two friends a few leftover Chao heads as the sounds of police sirens blared daringly close. "Let's go!"

To avoid capture, Team Sonic escaped the destroyed Chao Garden disguised as adorable Chao mascots. When they were in the clear, they immediately took off their disguises and in streaks of blue, red, and gold, sped down the streets. It was nearing midnight, and Tokyo was still flooded with people. But Sonic was quick enough to trace the sound of that ninja-like motorcycle toward the waterfront.

The bike struck out toward a lonely pier, but before the rider could gun the throttle off into the ocean, Sonic took a mascot head and rolled it under the bike's tire. Perfect strike! As the vehicle slid to a halt, the hedgehog zipped into place next to it and knocked on the rider's helmet politely. "Hold it right there, mysterious motorcycle person!" he said in his most Donut Lord–sounding voice. Tom would be proud. "Who are you?"

Knuckles and Tails pulled up on either side of the rider. They had him trapped now, and Sonic was sure he was going to reveal himself as a renegade ninja or a member of the yakuza. Sonic wasn't 100 percent sure what the word meant, but he heard it on TV a lot, and it sounded criminal and cool.

Yet as the man pulled his dark helmet off, he revealed a face no one had expected and certainly hadn't hoped for.

"It's the goat milker!" Knuckles cried.

Wait. What?!? The coffee-making, identity-stealing weirdo who followed Dr. Robotnik around like a lost puppy had saved their lives? How did that track?

"Excuse me," the man sneered. "My name is Agent Stone, you intergalactic aardvark."

“Why did *you* save us?” Tails asked incredulously. “And what are you doing in Tokyo?”

“Looking for answers, just like you.”

“Umm, pretty sure the answers are obvious.” Sonic strolled around him flicking off accusations on his fingers. “It’s clear that you and Eggman are back, and that you freed Shadow, and then attacked Walters!”

“No,” Stone said. “The doctor is responsible for many brilliant but villainous acts, but this latest string of events wasn’t his plan. And I can prove it.”

Stone reached into his biker jacket (which actually looked way cooler than Sonic was willing to admit out loud) and pulled out a small key fob.

*Twerp! Twerp! Whooooooosh!*

At the press of a button, a massive Crab Mech the size of a jet plane arose from the bottom of the harbor. Seawater sloshed off its side as its razor-sharp legs snapped into place. Sonic and his team took defensive stances, ready for another bruising battle. But then Agent Stone did the last thing any of them were ready for. He acted nicely.

“Please, join me in the crab,” he said.

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# CHAPTER 7

Robotnik was no mere man. He wasn't one of those squishy, soft-bodied suburbanites who lapped up milkshakes and mediocrity from the trough corporate America laid out. He was a supreme specimen. An illustrious intellect. And after a meticulous mechanical merging with the Master Emerald, he had even ascended to the status of cosmic god!

But that was before the intervention of that blasted blue hedgehog. And now, oh how the mighty had fallen.

He could still see it in his mind's eye (which had perfect photographic recall, of course). His Giant Eggman Robot towering over the silly little town. People fleeing in terror at the exercising of his absolute power and authority. And then the golden gleam of that ultra-powered rat blasting everything he'd made into oblivion.

Yet Robotnik had survived. He'd gone underground. And what he found there was a light that could sustain his mind even in the depths of despair and failure. He'd found 217 episodes of betrayal, heartbreak, and the superbly twirling mustache of a villain who enthralled millions of fans across Mexico, Latin America, and certain pockets of the American Southwest that had good taste. It was delicioso in the extreme and not remotely pathetic. That's science.

"Treason's greetings, my streaming sycophants. I have returned to deduce, debate, and dissect the latest episode of *La Última Pasión*!" he intoned into his phone to what Stone had assured him were an army of social media followers. A clever mustachioed filter kept his identity a secret for security purposes, but he was certain his genius was evident from the depth of his media analysis. "Let today's twist be a lesson to Juan: Family is a weakness that will only abandon, betray, and destroy you. Listen to your cerebro, not your corazón, tu imbécil!"

Robotnik's Spanish had improved greatly over the binge. He now knew how to insult, berate, and belittle everyone around him in two languages. And that came in handy.

"Stone! Are you back from the store?" he called at the sound of a hatch opening. "We're out of goat's leche!"

"Doctor…we have visitors," came the voice of his attendant. Behind Stone walked…

"Perish in flames, foul nemeses!" Robotnik reached for the closest weapon of animal destruction, which turned out to be a drone that short-circuited with a *splotch* from all the guacamole and salsa it had inside.

"Not my burrito drone!" Robotnik groaned. "¡Qué mal! What's the point? They win. *Again*."

The hedgehog stepped forward. That most hated, heinous little furball never had time for anything but back talk and disrespect for the doctor's brilliance. So why did he now look upon Robotnik with an expression of pity?

"I don't believe it. Eggman's alive!"

"And he's never looked…worse?" said Sonic's fox sidekick. To be described thus by an inferior life-form and an inferior inventor? Truly, this was his lowest moment.

"This is sad, Robotnik. Even for you," spoke the gravelly voice of his erstwhile ally, Knuckles the Echidna. Once again, Robotnik was proven wrong. *Now* was his lowest moment.

"Since your last battle, the doctor has been aimlessly wandering the planet in a bit of a, shall we say, existential tailspin," Stone said with a stiff upper lip.

Robotnik sunk lower into his couch—his last source of true comfort in this world. "What do I do with my pointless, pitiful existence?" he lamented. "I had ultimate power in the palm of my hand! I was once a Pablo—filled with the fire and thirst for conquest! Now I'm just a pathetic Juan—left with nothing…no one…nada…"

On the screen, the dulcet tones of the actors on *La Última Pasión* carried Robotnik back into a state of reverie. If only he could rewax his mustache to the level of Pablo—curly, confident, and cruel as only a true mastermind can command an upper lip to be. Now the doctor's own 'stache drooped low with the floppy form of a soggy tortilla.

“Since the crash, the doctor has gotten very into telenovela soap operas after a recent stay in Mexico,” Stone said.

“Ah yes.” Knuckles stroked his chin. “I am familiar with this *La Última Pasión* after a recent sojourn to Reno, Nevada.”

“So, you’re a fan then?”

“Absolutely not.”

“You should check it out. It makes a great binge,” Robotnik said with the weight of his many lost months sinking into his brain. It seemed today the only energy he had left after his brush with power was the juice it took to wallow in his self-pity. But he would do that better than any fallen scientist ever had! “Oh, none of it matters anymore! My days of evildoing and world-dominating are over. I…am done!”

Robotnik collapsed to the most depressed cushion in dramatic style. If he could not scheme with the power of a Pablo, he would wail with the anguish of an Isabella.

“C’mon, man.” Sonic circled him suspiciously. “You expect us to believe that you had nothing to do with Shadow’s escape and attack on Tokyo?”

“We’re in Tokyo right now?” Robotnik had not realized where he was. Or what day it was. Or when he last showered. “Alas, I had no part in this attack you speak of. A true genius never takes credit for another’s work.”

“Well, someone’s taking credit for your work,” the fox warned cryptically.

“Show him, minion,” said Knuckles.

Stone looked nervously about the room. Having such a dedicated manservant had many advantages, but their paralyzing fear of disappointing you was not one of them. Robotnik would have to remember to smack that fear out of him when the two were alone later.

After a moment, Stone finally hooked a small black drive to the Crab Mech’s interior wall of security monitors. They flickered to life, showing the fish-eyed view of his own proprietary technology. And whatever shot this footage was zooming in on his three animal foes surrounded by…a fleet of his own egg drones?

“NO!” he cried, leaping to his feet. “My sweet machines! Whomever the galactic garbage squad is looking for has also stolen my precious babies. That can only mean one thing…Ivo Robotnik has an impostor!”

“First of all, how am I just learning that your first name is Ivo?” Sonic said. “Secondly, do you mind closing that robe, doctor?” He winced at Robotnik’s full splendor.

*Bah!* What was exposing his flabby form compared to the thrill of finding a new purpose? Just as every telenovela had taught him over thousands of binged hours, there was only one constant virtue in this life… revenge! And as he paced through the bowels of his Crab Mech, Robotnik began to feel a new vengeful idea forming in his oh-so-accomplished brain.

“By cross-referencing the precise longi- and-latitudinal coordinates of each drone’s energy spikes…amplified by their optical frequency multiplier and intensity radiative flux…I can determine the impostor’s specific base of operations right…here!” A flurry of typing called up a digital map on the monitor bank. In the middle of it all, a red blinking dot burned like the growing fury in Robotnik’s own heart. “Stone, fire up the crab.”

“With pleasure, sir.” His majordomo saluted before shaking the shoulders of the fox with glee. “He’s back! Again!”

“Hold on.” The rotten blue hedgehog stepped in even as the mobile base began to hum back to life. “You think we’re gonna let you go after these guys without us? You’re an unhinged evil madman.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that,” Robotnik replied. Even he could acknowledge the respect of his enemies when it arrived.

“Not a compliment!” Sonic screeched. “And it’s our job to take down Shadow and whoever he’s working with. So, wherever you’re going, we’re going, too. Don’t even try to outrun us.”

Robotnik immediately made a break to outrun them. A swivel brought him face-to-face with the fox. A nudge to the right found Knuckles waiting for battle. And a slide in between them only had Sonic tapping his foot with annoying impatience.

“Touché,” the doctor said, relenting in the end. “While my beautiful mind can outrun yours by light-years, my feeble legs cannot. It appears any attempt to catch this mysterious marauder must come with you attached to my hip.” But a particularly perverse idea was forming in his mind. “I propose an alliance…an armistice…a treaty…a team-up, even!”

He held out a hand for the hedgehog’s blistering ridiculous glove to take hold of. And the creature took the bait.

Yes, Robotnik had fallen. But if he could not be the villain he once was, maybe he could be reborn as a hero…until the moment when such a pose was of no more use to him. Much like Pablo had once played the part of his virtuous identical primo, Pancho, in *La Última Pasión*, the doctor would take on the role of daring do-gooder for now. It would be easy enough to act just like the pathetic protagonist of the program.

"¡Ahora, retomo mi destino!" cried the enfeebled Juan on the television screen, and Robotnik repeated the call in a tongue these simpletons could understand. "Today, I take back my destiny!" Then he took a moment's pause. "But first, Stone? Make me a latte."

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# CHAPTER 8

For as long as he could remember, Shadow the Hedgehog had dreamed of escape. The doctor always told him that his origins and destiny lay beyond the stars, but from the moment he first opened his eyes, all he ever knew was G.U.N. When Shadow awoke in their clutches, he wanted to believe the system built by these so-called men was honest and true. They called themselves guardians. They said they worked to preserve the peace of nations. And of course, one way or the other, they brought Maria into his life. But that was before they so cruelly took her away.

That was when Shadow knew he must escape their kind for good. So then why had he agreed to return to the heart of their horrible experiment?

The wind blew cold and stung like a needle outside the lab of the so-called Project Shadow. Fifty years had passed since he was last here, but underneath the faded CONDEMNED PROPERTY signs on the outside fence, the place was as empty and sterile as Shadow remembered it. Only the girl gave this place life.

Inside the facility, the cryo-tank in which Shadow was once studied looked just as harsh as his memories, even though its glass was now shattered to pieces. He traced a finger over a jagged edge and remembered. This was where they'd first met. Day after day, still shocked from his intergalactic arrival on Earth, Shadow would open his eyes to a room full of the strange, hairless creatures. That was until one morning when a small human—barely taller than him—approached and touched the glass. He eyed her suspiciously, but the small one simply pulled out a stubby writing tool and marked the tank with a curious symbol. A smile.

Shadow could not help but return the gesture, and their friendship was born.

It was hard not to think back on that bond now as the hedgehog stalked the silent hallways that were once filled with laughter. Here, they would race the hallways on roller skates. They'd stay up late and watch monster movies. And sometimes, they'd even be able to sneak out and lie on the compound lawn to watch the night sky. Why had he ever gone back inside?

"Wow. Look at all those planets and stars," Maria once told him. "I wonder which one you come from."

"I don't know. I don't know anything about my home."

"This is your home, Shadow. Earth."

"It doesn't feel like it. The way the scientists look at me. They're afraid of me. Like I'm the monster in one of your scary movies. Do you think that's who I am?"

Maria rolled up on an elbow and crinkled her brow at him in a way that meant all his internal anguish was silly. "I know exactly who you are," she said. "You're my friend. And you can do—or be—anything you want. Not because of your powers, but because of who you are…" She pointed to the center of his chest. "…In here."

Those early months were a whirlwind. Maria was the only person in that lab who offered Shadow her own name—not the authoritative titles of "Captain" or "Doctor" so many other humans insisted on. She would bring him treats and draw him pictures. She showed him the joy of running, even if he could only ever run on a circular track. She showed him what it meant to be alive, even if it was living in a cage.

But the reality of their life always found ways to bleed in. As he made his way to the living quarters they once shared, Shadow was struck with a much sadder memory: the first fight G.U.N. had over Maria's existence. In retrospect, that was the beginning of the end.

"This is highly unorthodox, Walters!" a lab-coated technician barked. "You've got a child scrawling messages in marker all over one of the most important scientific laboratories in the world. It's not just a joke…it's dangerous!"

"Maria is our lead researcher's granddaughter!" the young G.U.N. captain snapped back. "Keeping him happy is priority one for you. And as for her creative streak, it appears to keep the Ultimate Life-Form subdued, which is frankly all I care about. So unless you have a better suggestion for achieving our objectives, I suggest you…oh! Shadow!"

They shut up once they knew he was listening, but the damage was done. From there on out, Shadow knew that he and Maria were on their own. He just didn't realize how soon after they would come for her…or that Walters would be the agent of their destruction.

But vengeance was not far off now. The doctor had promised him that. All he had to do now was wait here, in their living quarters. Shadow stood still as stone in the only place he'd ever been happy. It was so pathetic to think of it that way, but it was true. This was his home. And once it was taken from him, there was only one thing to do in response.

"This is for you, Maria," he said. "All of this is for you."

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# CHAPTER 9

*Zam!*

A massive ring portal lit up the skies just long enough for Sonic to read the faded CONDEMNED PROPERTY signs on the fence ahead of them. Robotnik seemed to be taking them where he said he would, but you could never be too careful about these things.

As they approached whatever this abandoned property was, an icy wind whipped through Sonic's quills. He shivered at the touch of it. But the hedgehog couldn't tell what made him feel worse: the creepiness of this place or the fact that he had to trust ol' Eggman to take them closer to their goal. Either way, he wanted to get this mission over with faster than fast.

"Ingenious design!" Robotnik called out as he, Team Sonic, and Agent Stone approached the main building's massive door. "This door is six inches thick, solid steel on a pressurized latch. I'd say that I couldn't have made it better myself, but of course, there's no feat of engineering I can't improve on." Just like an evil genius to monologue his way through a mission. Gross. "Anyway, I'll need a moment to invert the venting mechanics and create a suitable…"

*Clunk!*

With one punch, Knuckles busted the door's lock and sent each half of the barrier skittering down an empty hallway.

"I unlocked it," Sonic's gruff friend said.

"Subtle as always," Robotnik sneered in reply.

"Keep on doing your thing, buddy." Sonic patted the echidna on the shoulder and strutted through. "One thing you gotta learn, Ro-Butt-Nik, is that when you're out hero-ing, you can't always stop to smell the science. All we've got to do is figure out what this place is."

“It looks like some kind of old military base,” Tails noted, scanning every inch of the dark hallway with his device. “This is G.U.N. property from the looks of it, but they scrubbed the place clean long ago. I wonder if it’s haunted.”

“Haunted?” Knuckles bristled at the word. “What do you mean haunted?”

“Oh, boogie boogie boogie!” Robotnik taunted. “Scared of g-g-ghosts?”

“Nothing scares an Echidna warrior. *Nothing*.”

They reached a fork in the path. Ahead of them, three identical hallways stretched out into equal patches of pitch black. Whatever this Shadow guy was hunting for was ahead of them, but how to find it wasn’t Sonic’s specialty.

“Let’s split up!” the doctor said. “Everyone with hideous brightly colored fur, take the left or middle. Stone and I will go right, and then…”

“Oh no!” Sonic cut in. “I’m not letting you out of my sight. Eggman, you and me can go right. Tails, you and Stone go left. Knuckles, take the middle.”

Tails hopped to, as enthusiastic as always. Sonic watched his flashlight shine down the left hallway as Agent Stone’s voice echoed along, asking, “So, Tails, what’s it like being Sonic’s assistant?”

“I’m not his assistant!” the fox said. “We’re best friends. Like you and Eggman, right?”

“Oh yes,” Stone said defeatedly as his voice began to fade. “Me and the doctor. Best friends…definitely what we are…” It was almost enough to make you feel bad for the guy, the way you’d feel bad for a lost puppy.

“And so I will go this way. Alone,” Knuckles said after a beat. “And that is fine. Because nothing scares an Echidna warrior. You hear that, ghosts?! You do not frighten me! It is you who should cower in fear!”

“If you see anything dangerous, just punch a hole in the wall!” Sonic called after his friend. “Well, I guess that just leaves you and me, Ivo. Still can’t get used to calling you that, by the way.”

“Under the circumstances, I will also answer to Master, Your Greatness, or His High Exalted Genius of Scientific Theory and Practice, if that makes you more comfortable, hedgehog.” Robotnik strode ahead down the tunnel, acting more and more like his old self. Sonic stayed on his toes. There was no telling when a double cross might arrive.

The pair of foes searched the dusty remains of the base. The airy echoes of their footsteps bounced around each new pathway or laboratory. But nothing useful presented itself. At last, they came upon a room that wasn't stripped bare for parts: an apartment of sorts with couches, beds, even an old TV. And Sonic could tell by the dust motes floating in the air, someone had recently been in this room.

"Whoa," Sonic marveled as Robotnik shined a light on the scene. "This place wasn't just a base or a lab…it was a home. A family lived here…"

*"Pfft,"* the Eggman spat. "Family? A word synonymous with disappointment."

"Spoken with big loser energy," Sonic said. "Come on, Eggman, you never wondered how your life would have turned out if you had a family? Maybe you wouldn't have gone full supervillain!"

"It is pointless to hypothesize an impossibility. My genius-genealogy ends with yours truly. I even hacked the DNA databases of the world to confirm that every other strand was kaput. I am the *only* Robotnik left. All family ever left me was a worthless middle initial. I never cared for the letter *G* after that."

"Ivo G. Robotnik?!" Sonic laughed as he stepped through the darkened room. "It gets better and better! Let me guess, the *G* stands for Geek? No, too easy. It must be Gizmo…or Gear-Loose! Then again, 'Ivo Gruesome Robotnik' has a nice ring to it!"

*Shunk!*

Suddenly, a thick metal door slammed shut behind Sonic. "Hey, Eggman!" he called out, pounding on the barrier with no handle in sight. "Did you do that? Because if so, not cool, man!" Sonic's killer sense of humor had never been turned against him like this.

Sonic scanned the new room and realized that running lights had activated around a high-tech lab setup. Even G.U.N. couldn't have yanked everything out of this place. A massive glass tank anchored the center of the room. It was the same one Sonic had seen on Walters' video feed back at the Chao Garden Café, only now its glass was cracked into pieces. But that's not what caught Sonic's eye. On the far side of the space, a splash of color shone between two discarded computer banks.

As he approached, Sonic could make out a series of children's drawings. There was a field of shining stars climbing up the wall, and

beneath those, two figures stood hand in hand with big toothy smiles beaming out. One was a little girl with blond hair, and the other one was… Shadow. It looked so much like Sonic's own cave drawing of himself next to Longclaw that his heart skipped a beat.

At the very bottom corner, Sonic could just make out one final clue. Written in a kid's hand was the message "To My Best Friend Shadow… Love, Maria."

"I knew you'd come here to kill me," growled a now familiar voice. "But not if I kill you first!"

*Smash!*

Shadow appeared from nowhere, swinging Sonic around and through the remaining glass of the cryo-tank. The force hurt less than the fact that this guy had gotten the jump on him once again.

"To be clear, I'm here to talk to you," Sonic said as he rolled and regained his balance. "You know what talking is, right? Hedgehog to hedgehog?"

"Don't lie!" His opponent was full of rage. "G.U.N. sent you to take me out."

With another glitching time jump, Shadow curled Sonic's skull in one hand like a basketball and lifted him in the air.

"Okay, technically yes, but the funny thing is, I kinda want to help you now!"

"You should be begging for help!" Shadow shouted and threw Sonic away. A series of pummeling blows followed as the blue hedgehog tried to fight force with reason. It's what Tom would have wanted, right?

"Shadow, listen," Sonic said, sliding away from speeding fists. "I know something terrible happened to you here…"

"You don't know anything about me or what I've been through!"

"I think I do." Sonic tried again. "Because I know what it feels like to lose someone you care about!"

*Wham!*

A punch finally connected and sent Sonic skittering across the floor. Luckily, he landed right next to the marker mural. He pointed to the image of Shadow and this Maria girl, pleading his case. "When I came to this planet, I'd lost the most important person in my life. I thought I had no one. But I was lucky enough to meet a friend. His name is Donut Lord…Tom,

really. And if *anything* ever happened to him, I'd be just as angry as you are."

Shadow stopped. He turned away, his breathing heavy, but his body still. Maybe Sonic was finally getting through to him.

"That's why I know I can help you." Sonic reached out a hand. "You may not believe me, but we're a lot more alike than you know…"

"I'm *nothing* like you," Shadow said as a shiver of red energy built through his body like electric rage. In a blink, he turned one powerful punch Sonic's way, and then the world went black.

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# CHAPTER 10

Robotnik was alone. And that's just the way he liked it.

Calculating the probability of what might happen in this third-rate remnant of a scientific facility had been easy enough. The odds that the animal agents stupid enough to trust him would be taken out by their mysterious enemy? Four to one. That Agent Stone would somehow get himself sidelined before he could be of any use? Sadly, ten to one. That the vile speedy needle-mouse would walk his way into a trap? Two to one at best.

But the only probability that mattered in the end was the question of whether Robotnik himself would be the last man standing. And that was a virtual certainty. Now all he had to do was achieve his true objective: steal back his beloved technology from whatever simpleton impostor was trying to claim his name.

Through the dark of the base, the doctor's nimble fingers flew over his control glove's keypad. Its display led him out of the shabby living quarters like cheese led a rat through a maze. And at last, he found himself in a surprisingly slick workshop. The hardware there seemed up to date, but that's only because at its heart sat…

"My darlings!" Robotnik cried as he fell to his knees and embraced six kidnapped egg drones. He thought he'd never see them again. "How dare someone take you from me? I'll never let their filthy little fingers touch you again!"

"Ah, ah, ah," a creaky voice called from the shadows far across the workshop. "Don't make a promise you can't keep, my boy."

"Who goes there?" Robotnik hurled the question like a bomb. "Show yourself, and I'll grant you an efficient end from my bots' lacerating lasers!" With a flick of a switch, the egg drones floated to life around his

head, their red eyes throbbing with menace. “Trust me, it’s a better way to go than being sliced and diced by their mechanized mandibles.”

“Oh, I’d be shaking in my booties.” The voice chuckled. “If I couldn’t simply reply to your threats with…come to papa.”

With that phrase, the egg drones ceased all defensive maneuvers and floated across the room, where they circled the stranger with a gentle ease only Robotnik had ever commanded before. It was enough to turn the doctor’s blood cold. Or at least colder than it already was, which was quite chilly.

“I…I don’t believe it,” Robotnik said as he made out the outline of a twirling gray mustache and a bald pate on the man who now commanded his own brilliant creations. “This is impossible. Illogical. Preposterously paradoxical…”

“Yes, Ivo, it’s true. I am in fact…”

“The impostor who stole my babies!” Robotnik shouted. He couldn’t help it, for the man who stepped from the shadows didn’t just have his egg drones. He also had Robotnik’s face.

“They are magnificent creations, my boy,” the impostor cooed. He couldn’t be a clone, because up close Robotnik could see the crow’s feet underneath this man’s goggles that showed decades of aging that he himself had not yet lived. “Sorry to use your tech without permission, but it was the only way to lure you here and reunite our family. You see, Ivo…I’m your grandfather.”

“G-g-g-g—” Robotnik choked on the letter, finally spitting out the name he’d only read on his own birth certificate before now. “Gerald Robotnik?”

No. It couldn’t be. It was a sham. A ruse. A holographic projection at best. A leftover hallucination from Robotnik’s time imprisoned on that contemptible planet of mushrooms, perhaps. But a long-lost grandfather? His scientific mind rejected the premise as patently absurd. “Prove it,” he demanded.

“Test me!” The old man raised his hand theatrically. It was a bit much, to be honest. “Like all great Robotniks, I have the answer to *everything*!”

If it was to be a battle of wits, then Robotnik would cull the depths of his computerlike cranium to flummox this fiendish apparition. “What is the most beautiful formula in all mathematics?” he cried.

“Euler’s Identity. *E* to the power of *i* times *pi* plus one equals zero!”

“European capitals arranged alphabetically by fourth letter?”

“Riga, Monaco, Sarajevo, Tirana…”

“Speed of light, divided by the speed of sound, multiplied by the speed of a speeding bus?”

“12,139 miles per second!”

“The Mark III Master System is…?”

“A criminally underrated game console whose innovative use of graphics far outstrips our understanding of what a mere eight bits can do!”

Jumping Jehoshaphat! Even Robotnik could hardly comprehend the implications of this discovery, which meant that no other mind on Earth could comprehend it. But one mind of course could comprehend it because that mind stood before him now!

“Grandpa Gerald!” Robotnik cried for joy. The implications of this discovery were endless. But for starters, it meant that he would have to start referring to himself as “Ivo” in all his internal monologues to keep things from getting too confusing.

“In the flesh and looking pretty good for one hundred and ten years young.” The old man smiled. “Now how ’bout a hug for grampie?”

They embraced. It was the first real thrilling physical human contact Ivo Robotnik could recall in his life. And stunningly less gross than he’d imagined such a thing. “Oh, Grandfather,” he said. “I think I’ve waited my entire life for a moment like this! Which reminds me: Where have you been my entire life?!”

“I was locked in a top secret prison for the past fifty years,” Grandpa Gerald explained. “That makes it kinda hard to send Christmas cards. But sentimentality can wait for a later date. For now, we’ve got a clutch of rodents to exploit, my boy.”

“You know about the hedgehog and his ilk?” Ivo asked.

“Hedgehogs!” Gerald cackled. “Like I said…I have the answer to everything.”

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# CHAPTER 11

Sonic shook himself awake when his cheek hit the cold metal floor. His head still ached from the last blow he took, but that wasn't what hurt most. What really stung was the fact that his arms and legs were tied tight with some kind of restraint. There was no way for him to run. And nowhere for him to run to. For the moment, at least.

"You know, pal, if you wanted to practice tying your Hog Scout knots, I could have helped you do it with something a little more low stakes like a pair of branches or some leftover dynamite," Sonic called after Shadow, who walked away from him with indifference.

"Bite your tongue!" called a voice high above. Sonic looked up to see his more familiar foe, only this time the doctor was…wrinklier?

"Eggman?" He blinked at the sight. "But you're so…*old*."

"Can it, foul space vermin!" replied the elderly man.

"Yeah, you wretched lawn weasel!" cried another Robotnik. This one looked more like the real thing, but…was Sonic seeing double now?

"Someone tell me this is a concussion-induced nightmare!" Sonic groaned. "There are two Eggmen now?!"

"You must be the long-lost grandson," Shadow said, looking at who must have been Ivo Robotnik up and down as he took his place between the mad scientists.

"And you must be…another hedging hedgehog!" Ivo could barely contain his disgust.

"Ivo, meet Shadow…my greatest discovery," said the old man.

A horrible realization struck Sonic's aching brain. "Wait…Grandpa Robotnik was the G.U.N. scientist who got Shadow locked in cryo-freeze?" He tried to appeal to his dark double one last time. "Shadow, my man, we really are alike. We've both got a Robotnik trying to ruin our lives!"

“This is not yet the worst of it, my friend,” Knuckles called out.

Sonic looked to his right and saw that both Knuckles and Tails were tied up on the far side of the room. All three heroes were on the floor of some kind of test track chamber. It must have been the heart of Project Shadow where the older Robotnik experimented on the misguided hedgehog decades before.

“Oh, hey guys,” Sonic called to his friends. “Great to see you here. I was starting to worry that I was really in big trouble until just now.”

“You’re in more trouble than you know, you smooth-brained miscreant,” the elder Robotnik called from his perch above. “My dream of fully harnessing chaos energy and inspiring a new era of scientific innovation is finally at hand. With you in my clutches, I can complete my work and build a beacon of salvation for all humanity without the interference of G.U.N. and its thugs.”

“Funny you should mention them,” Sonic said. “Walters told us this lab accident that ended your research was *your* fault.”

“Walters *lied*!” the old man screamed. “He’s a spy who deceives small, pathetic minds like yours to cover his tracks. All the while, the innocent are locked away to die with the truth. Like me…and my family. Those monsters tried to steal Shadow’s power out from under me. They wanted to create a superweapon. And when they were exposed, my granddaughter paid the price.”

Shadow squeezed his eyes tight in pain, and Sonic finally saw how the pieces fit together. “Maria…,” he said.

“Precisely,” Grandpa Robotnik said. “My beloved Maria—Ivo’s cousin—was lost while Shadow and I were blamed for G.U.N.’s atrocities. I spent fifty years in prison with nothing but my grief and the residual chaos energy I’d absorbed from Shadow’s quills keeping me alive. But after decades of mulling the unsolvable problem of how to exact my revenge, a plot formed in my mind. If G.U.N. wanted a superweapon, I would design them one in exchange for my freedom. And once free, I would deliver them the key to their own destruction…the Eclipse Cannon!”

The older man clicked his fingers together, and above their heads a giant hologram of a laser-powered satellite shimmered into focus. Grandpa Robotnik walked down a ramp to the floor where they lay, which made

Sonic nervous partly because this guy was a dangerous nut but also because he did *not* look like he smelled good.

"My masterpiece!" the old Robotnik cheered.

"An interstellar orbital defense system designed to neutralize extraordinary threats!" Ivo marveled.

"What cowardly nonsense is this?" Knuckles called.

"It's basically a big, giant space laser," Tails said nervously.

"And we're one step closer to stealing it back, thanks to our sub-mentally stupid blue friend here." Grandpa grinned as he leaned over Sonic's restrained form. "Thanks for delivering Commander Walters' launch key, Sonic! You saved us a lot of work."

"Wait—no! You can't!" Sonic strained against the bonds, but he was powerless to stop the old man from reaching into his sock and taking the device with the eclipse symbol that Walters had entrusted him with. In the future, Sonic had to get some kind of a fanny pack with a padlock on it or at least something with zip-up pockets!

"The second launch key is locked away in G.U.N. Headquarters in London," the wrinkled madman said as he ran back up the ramp. "With that in hand, Shadow and I can take control of the glorious weapon and annihilate the monsters who betrayed us. But what good is revenge if you can't do it with your family? What say you, Ivo? Wanna steal a giant space laser with Grandpa?"

"Let me get this straight," original recipe Robotnik said. "You miraculously kept yourself alive for decades in prison, negotiated your way out, stole my technology, released the Ultimate Life-Form, which is a wicked hedgehog, and lured me to this exact location where our family was destroyed…all to recruit me for an evil mission to extinguish the souls of the men who ruined our lives?"

"Bingo."

"I'm in, Gramps!" Ivo laughed. "But what do we do with this space swine?"

The older doctor didn't even look back at where Sonic, Tails, and Knuckles lay. "They'll be killed instantly in a chaos-powered vortex that will wipe this wretched place from existence," he said and tossed an egg drone down that landed in between Sonic and his friends.

“Wow, you really are a Robotnik!” Ivo said with pride as Agent Stone appeared to lead the villains away.

“Shadow, wait!” Sonic called. “You don’t have to do this! You still have a choice!”

“I made my choice long ago,” Shadow replied and followed his team out.

“Have a nice death, losers!” called one of the Robotniks. It was hard to say which.

Team Sonic was on their own now. The egg drone began to beep and crackle and shake in a way that didn’t seem like they were going to have much time. But Sonic wasn’t ready to give up just yet.

*Whoooooosh!*

In the middle of the test track, the drone morphed into a miniature black hole, and like a plug had been pulled from the world’s weirdest bathtub, Sonic felt the swirling pull of oblivion. Sheets of metal began to peel up off the floor at the center of the room and get sucked away. Sonic couldn’t fight its pull…so he didn’t try to.

“Hold on…I’m coming your way!” he cried and rolled his body until the force of the vortex slid him around the room to Knuckles and Tails’ position. With the force of a cannonball, Sonic slid into his best friends *hard*, but thankfully Knuckles was able to plant one fist deep into the metal floor of the track. Still, all around them, the pull of the growing black hole yanked at their limbs. They only had seconds to go.

“Was your plan to push us further toward doom?” Knuckles shouted.

“That was step one,” Sonic said. “Anyone got a step two?”

“Try to grab one of my rings!” Tails flashed the small pack of warp rings he kept hidden away between his twin tails.

“Better than a fanny pack with a padlock!” Sonic cheered and then squeezed his restrained hand toward the fox. With extreme effort, he was able to grab a ring and balance it between his thumb and forefinger. “Got one! Now check this out…trick shot!”

*Zam!*

The ring flew into the air and opened up to Sonic’s desired location… only it, too, was caught in the black hole vortex. Their one chance at salvation was swirling above their heads with increasing speed.

“Was the trick to make us disappear?” Knuckles groaned.

“We’ve got to let it pull us in!” Tails said. “Knuckles, get ready to let go!”

“As you wish, fox. We will be sucked to our fate with honor!”

Sonic saw Tails’ plan and set his feet to push toward the spinning portal as soon as it reached their precarious place on the rapidly shrinking track floor. A whirlwind spun around them as Tails finally counted down, “Three…two…one…NOW!”

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# CHAPTER 12

Things hadn't gone perfectly for Tails since he arrived on Earth. And to be honest? That was hard to deal with.

The fox arrived on the planet with one goal in mind: saving Sonic the Hedgehog. And did he do it? You bet he did. He didn't just help the fastest hero around avoid getting clobbered by a Knuckles out for vengeance. Tails helped them all become best friends. And he rewired a few critical inventions along the way. And he helped beat back Dr. Robotnik's giant mech menace. And he also built a plane from scratch. Pretty cool!

But when it was all over, the kid some called Miles "Tails" Prower also saw how much devastation their fight caused the city of Green Hills. He worried that their adventures to clean up renegade robots in the town dump would get them in trouble. And most of all, he feared that the Wachowskis wouldn't want him around if he blew another crater in their house…which is exactly what happened once they escaped the black hole vortex.

*Zam!*

With a force roughly equivalent to the escape velocity of Earth, Team Sonic blasted into Tom and Maddie's dining room. And Tails could see as they tumbled out of danger the way the walls were damaged, and the dishes were shattered. They'd even scattered the puzzle Tom was working on all over the house. Not good!

"Tom! Maddie!" Sonic cried, almost oblivious to the damage. "We need your help on a supersecret mission! The world is in danger!"

"Oh, thank god!" Tom let out a deep, satisfied sigh.

"Yeah, let's go!" Maddie jumped up.

"Really? You're in just like that?" Tails was shocked. "Because usually making a mess like this is where we get a talk about power and responsibility?"

“We can skip it.” Maddie smiled. “We love you no matter what. And it was getting *so* boring here without you guys, anyway.”

“Whatever crazy plan you’re cooking up right now, the answer is ‘yes!’ ” Tom agreed.

But having just avoided getting their atoms scrambled in a unique trap of physics, there really was no plan. Even Knuckles could sense it. “I fear we have already failed.” He shook his head. “It is only a matter of time until the Robotniks have the second launch key to this Eclipsing Cannon.”

“We’re not beat yet!” Tails rose up in confidence. If the family could stand by him even when he was anxious, maybe he could save the day even when he had his doubts. “We know where the bad guys are going. And we know what they’re planning.”

“So we just have to do exactly what they’re going to do…only faster,” Sonic said. “I can take care of the second part, but I’m going to need some help on the first. Any ideas, pal?”

“Yeah.” The fox felt the old thrill of a challenging logistical problem. “But I’ll have to explain everything as we go.”

As quickly as he could, Tails called forth the basic schematics he’d copied from G.U.N.’s files while piloting their helicopter. Anxiety didn’t solve all their problems, but it could help you get prepared from time to time. With a digital map on his Miles Electric Device as a guide, he spread a holographic plan across the family dining table. He had to cover all their upcoming objectives, so he hoped it was perfect.

“This is it, team. The belly of the beast. G.U.N. Headquarters in the heart of London,” he said as he leaned over the digital model of the city of London’s central corridor. “Phase One involves breaking through the outer perimeter of the main building here.” Tails pointed to a gleaming tower. “Now that won’t be easy.”

“No problem.” Sonic kicked his feet up on the dining room table. “I’ll just run in there superfast, grab the second key, and then run out *insanely* fast. That work for everyone?”

“Not exactly,” Tails replied. “The whole headquarters has been ‘Sonic-Proofed.’ The building is surrounded with motion sensors that can detect your unique energy signature miles away. And every exterior wall is sealed with metallic glass. It’s totally unbreakable.”

“Nothing is unbreakable, fox.” Knuckles crunched up the mat in his hands. “Nothing!”

Tails nervously swept aside the exterior and pulled up a second hologram of the building’s complex interior. “If the time comes to bust those walls down, Knuckles, it’s all you,” he said. “But for now, let’s talk about Phase Two: internal security. Inside the building we’ll be facing a garrison of G.U.N.’s most elite Special Forces troops. Plus, the security system is hardwired with thermal heat emitters, radar speed detectors, and jet engine–level fans. If we can’t directly hack their system to give me full control over it all, we’ll get burnt to a crisp, trapped in a cage, or blended into bits.”

The fox tapped a button on the screen of his Miles Electric, and like dominos the floors and walls of the hologram collapsed into a web of nightmare traps. Sonic could outrun anything, in Tails’ opinion, but this would be tough. “We absolutely *must* shut all this down in the security system while Sonic waits in position far away.”

“Good one, Tails!” Sonic laughed. “For a second, I thought you said I needed to wait around doing nothing while everyone else does hero stuff.”

“That’s exactly what I said.”

“Whaaaat?? But you know ‘waiting’ is my only weakness!”

“Would you rather rush right in and trigger a full building lockdown and a perimeter energy wall powered by one million watts of electricity?” Tails connected a wire from his Miles Electric Device, and another action figure ignited into a pile of melting plastic.

“You know what? Waiting sounds good. Yup. I’m cool with waiting.”

“Last but not least, there’s a Phase Three: the final laser hall.” Tails dialed up a hologram showing a web of crisscrossing laser lights around a vault door. “Every inch of this area is programmed with hundreds of AI-powered laser cannons. And only once you’re past that can you deal with the vault itself.” He tapped a final button, and the digital representation of the vault opened up to reveal…absolutely nothing inside.

“Um, why is it empty in your vault?”

“Because we have no idea what’s on the other side of that door.” Tails shook his head. “To safeguard this space from ever being compromised by a warp ring, G.U.N. wiped their entire database of images and schematics past the vault door. If we can’t picture what it looks like, we can’t ’port in

there no matter what security is turned off. Essentially, we're going in blind."

"Okay, I'm just going to say it." Maddie stood up and paced the room. "If Knuckles can't bash his way through the building, and Sonic can't race his way through security, *and* we don't even know whether the laser-guided vault holds the key we need…it sounds like this plan would be a lot easier if we just grabbed the Master Emerald and let Sonic go golden god mode to get in there."

"No way." The hedgehog crossed his arms. "The Master Emerald is off-limits. We made a promise to each other to keep it safe."

"And hidden," Tails added. "It's in a location that only Knuckles knows."

"As Guardian of the Emerald, I must declare anyone who tries to steal it for their own selfish gain my sworn enemy." Knuckles put his foot down.

"Okay, okay, sheesh!" Maddie threw her hands in the air. "No need to get all growly on me, buddy. But if we're set on this plan, what's the secret sauce that makes it work, Tails?"

The fox looked over all the broken pieces of the Wachowski home and felt that pang of anxiety once again. This was his riskiest move yet. Would they trust his scheme to make it right? "Well, Maddie…the secret to saving the day is going to rely on family."

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# CHAPTER 13

G.U.N. HQ security was laughably simple. Even a child could break through its defenses if it had half a brain. Luckily, Ivo Robotnik had more than a child's brain. He had a twelfth-level, highly evolved, catastrophically colossal, super cerebellum. In short, he had a Robotnik brain. There was no need to spend the final day before their big heist plotting out the whys and wherefores of laser systems or electrified floors.

Instead, Ivo focused his final hours before he liberated the final Eclipse Cannon launch key on what really mattered: Grandpapa!

Now that Gerald Robotnik was in his life, the doctor needed to make up for all the lost time they'd missed together. And since they were in the middle of a brilliantly nefarious scheme, only the magic of virtual reality would allow them to fast-forward through decades of missed bonding time.

They rode a tandem bicycle next to the River Thames, kicking any small children they passed along the shore into the water. They held a special graduation ceremony for all nine of the PhDs that Ivo had earned on his way to being an evil genius, and Gerald delivered the commencement speech at all of them. They even played a Christmas morning with Ivo in a green-and-red onesie sitting on the lap of "Santa Gerald" who promised to bring him as many heat-seeking Scud missiles as he could fit in a stocking.

Ivo couldn't pick a favorite activity, nor could he pick a favorite nickname for Gerald. Of course, "Grandpapa" was a classic, but "Gramps," "Grandpappy," and "Big Daddy" were all in the running, with "Pee-Paw" climbing up in the rankings fast.

As night fell, the Crab Mech lurched and tilted where it was submerged under the English Channel, but Robotnik felt no seasickness. "Oh, Pee-Paw!" he called to Gerald. "Do you think we have time to rob a candy store before the big mission?"

“Hey, could I get in on that?” called Agent Stone over the doctor’s shoulder. He was so *needy* these days. So human. So un-Robotnik.

“Do you mind?” Ivo snapped. “You’re interrupting a cherished family moment, Stone!”

“There’s no time for further shenanigans,” Grandpa Gerald announced, entering the room. “Join me in the command center, my boy. It’s time to launch the final phase of our triumph.”

In front of the Crab Mech’s main monitor bank, the Robotniks and that creepy little creature Shadow (and even Stone, the bore) gathered together to proceed with their plan.

“Our main annoyance will be G.U.N.’s so-called Special Forces troops.” Ivo mocked the grunts. “They’re a horde of mouth-breathing troglodytes, probably named Clive or Ringo, all armed to the teeth with sub-primitive…”

“Get to the point!” growled the hedgehog.

“Uh, Grandpa? Would you mind asking your demon hamster to tone down his murder eyes a little bit?”

“Don’t worry about Shadow,” Gerald said in a soothing tone. “Just carry on with our mission, my boy.”

Soon, the familial team were at work on the idiotic Guardian Units of Nations. As they strolled through the London fog toward the headquarters, Ivo felt a giddy rush of evil energy. He had to share it with the world.

“Cheers, streaming sycophants! I’m back with my long-lost Grandpapa Gerald!” he said to a camera mounted to one of the several egg drones that floated along with them. “Say hi, Pop-Pop!”

“Who the heck are you talking to?” Grandpa groused.

“My followers, of course! They’re fanatics, obsessives, Team Robotnik, the so-called ‘Egg-Heads’…”

“There are seven of us now!” Stone chimed in.

“This is a waste of time,” Shadow said. “Let me go in, get the key, and destroy anyone who gets in my way.”

“You will have your revenge against G.U.N. soon, Shadow,” Grandpa Robotnik said. “But a mission this important requires planning, precision…”

“…and an IQ higher than twelve!” Ivo could not stand the hedgehog any longer. “So why don’t you hang back with Stone while the geniuses do

the real work?”

Ivo Robotnik was finally ready to repay his grandfather for a perfect day of bonding with his latest innovation: matching mirrored leotards! Not only would they have all the tech they needed hardwired into their mustachioed bodies, they would also be able to turn virtually invisible before they even crossed the threshold of headquarters. They’d totally be twinsies!

“Let’s go, Grandpa,” he said, zipping the silvery suit onto his frame. “It’s time for some more family bonding. Stone, take the rat back and keep the Crab warm. This won’t take long.”

From here on out, it would be a breeze. All they had to do was set their internal temperature sensors to avoid the floor’s thermal heat emitters, waltz past any motion radar detectors, and rope their way up the elevator shaft past the barbaric chopping fans. Their invisibility would make the laser vault a cinch to bust into, and then they’d conquer the world.

What possible bag of flesh and failure on planet Earth could ever stop the rise of the Robotniks now?

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# CHAPTER 14

Tom Wachowski was many things. He was father to a trio of intergalactic animal heroes. He was husband to a beautiful and talented wife. He was also a dedicated Lord of Donuts while also being a pretty decent pickleball player. But the thing he'd been proud of being for the longest time was a good cop.

Still, going undercover on an international mission was not the kind of thing he had a lot of experience in versus sitting in the Green Hills speed trap handing out tickets to absent-minded drivers. The former was much, much cooler than that.

"Guys! Are you ready for me yet?" Sonic's voice popped into Tom's ear from where the hedgehog stood two miles out waiting for his cue. "I've been waiting here all day!"

"We literally just started," Tails chimed in. The fox was controlling all communications from a remote location. "Tom, Maddie…are you both in position?"

"We're ready," Tom confirmed with as much '80s action hero gravel as he could muster. Maddie rolled her eyes at him. "Was that too much?"

"Little bit," she said before trying on her own growl. "They won't know what hit 'em."

"Ah, that was nice. Subtle difference, but I could feel your motivation more." Joking helped Tom relax as he stared across a nighttime square that led up to the G.U.N. HQ entrance.

Tails cut back in over the comm channel. "Knuckles, how about you?"

"I have taken my perch atop the giant clock, Big Benjamin," their most renegade family member reported. "Now where is the glass I am supposed to break?"

“Actually, Knucks, your job is just to ‘break glass in case of emergency,’ ” Sonic reminded him.

“Understood. I will shatter this glass like the jaw of a vile foe!”

“…in case of emergency,” Sonic repeated.

“I will pulverize it like the skull of a loathsome rival!”

“Again, key word here is *emergency*.”

“The glass will beg for mercy under the shadow of my mighty fists as I…”

“You know what?” Sonic sighed. “Let’s just move on.”

“Way to play nicely, boys.” Tom smiled.

“All right, everyone knows what to do now.” Tails took command again. “Tom and Maddie, you guys have to plant the USB drive that will give me control of the security traps into the G.U.N. mainframe. We’re all depending on you there. Then Sonic will rush in to snatch the launch key. And Knuckles will stand by to…”

“Break much glass in case of emergency!”

“See?” Sonic laughed. “He gets it.”

After all their time saving the world—heck, the universe even—it put Tom at ease to know these kids didn’t let the pressure of the job push them away from being kind brothers. It’s what made for good cops. But better than that, they were good people.

“Okay, sweetie,” he said, and winked at Maddie before dropping into his gravel voice one last time. “Let’s go to work.”

With that, Tom reached up and tapped a small button Tails had fixed into his jacket. With a flicker of light, a whole new holographic face spread out over Tom’s normal look. It was one last piece of G.U.N. tech that the fox had liberated from his contact with their systems. Maddie did the same, and suddenly they were the spitting image of two well-known, well-trusted agents.

“You’re not scared of what we’re about to do?” she asked.

“Break into the base of an international law enforcement agency for the purpose of espionage? No way,” Tom said. “Do it while pretending to be your sister’s husband…your sister who hated me well before our adopted alien son blew her wedding to pieces? Maybe a little scared of that, yeah.”

It was true. The small-town sheriff and veterinarian wife were indistinguishable from Rachel and Randall Handel. If the two of them got

caught on this job, going to a London jail would be the least of their problems. But Tom could take it. He could do anything to help his kids. He was the Donut Lord, dang it.

The couple crossed the building's threshold and approached the desk guard. Tom radiated Randall's confidence even if he didn't quite have his muscular frame. "Afternoon," he said in his deepest voice. "Agent Randall Handel, here with my lovely wife, Rachel."

"Ma'am, do you work in the building?" the guard asked. And Tom worried whether she did or not. He never asked Rachel about her life!

"Do I *work* in the building?" Maddie snapped in a flawless impersonation of her bossy sister. "Buddy, you're lucky I don't *own* the building!"

"Oh! Um…sorry, ma'am. Go on in."

"That's what I thought!" Maddie sniffed and lifted Rachel's chin high as they strode to the elevator.

With unshakable attitudes in place, the couple made their way to the fifth floor, following Tails' instructions to the letter. This was the make-or-break moment for their mission. Even as decorated an agent as Randall Handel couldn't waltz into the security control center and start barking orders. With another flick on her lapel, Maddie transformed once again, into a G.U.N. personality who Tom hoped was actually nowhere near this building right now.

"Director Rockwell, seeking access to the server room," she said in her closest approximation of the woman who was currently out to destroy their kids at all costs. Tom had shifted his own face to that of a nondescript agent at Rockwell's side. As far as Tom was concerned, turnabout was fair play.

"Just a moment, ma'am…," the security guard at the entrance to the server bank said before heading to the back. They waited for a tense few moments, but the door didn't open for them. Instead, a door down the hall opened up to reveal the *real* Director Rockwell coming through with a cadre of agents at her command.

"Switch!" Maddie whispered sharply before changing her own face back to Rachel. Tom froze in place as the woman whose identity they had just stolen walked by and shot him a stern look.

In a moment, the danger had passed, but Maddie looked at her husband quizzically. "Why didn't you shift?"

“This thing is hard to work!” He shrugged. But soon, Maddie had returned to her previous alias just in time for the guard to return and grant them unfettered access to the security servers.

“I hope this works, Tails!” Maddie said as she slid the USB drive into the requested slot.

“I’m in!” the fox called back on their earpiece comms.

“You better hurry up, buddy!” Tom said as a monitor screen in front of him flashed through every security camera in the place. Tails was working fast, it seemed, but Tom could see that Rockwell and dozens of other agents were swarming the building. One wrong move could blow their whole heist.

“Exterior speed sensors deactivated,” Tails called out. “I’m working on the inside traps now, but…this is strange!”

“What is it?” Tom asked impatiently.

“I’m getting some false readings here,” he said. “The heat emitters have been popping off at random. Even the elevator fan blades are working in overdrive. It’s like there’s a ghost in the machine making trouble all over where Sonic is supposed to run. Two of them even!”

“Wait!” Maddie said. “There’s another USB plugged in over here…and it has a mustache on it!”

“Oh no, the ghost signatures!” Tails realized too late. “Sonic, if you can read me, the Robotniks are almost at the vault door! It’s time!”

Just then, the monitor in front of Tom flipped to the vault room. It looked empty, and the laser cannons were drooping dead. But in that second, two shimmering shapes came to life and began attaching tech to the vault door. If there was ever a time his son needed to live up to his bragging rights, now was it.

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# CHAPTER 15

"Put me in, Coach!" Sonic cried the millisecond he heard Tails.

*Schwooooooosh!*

His feet flew like they rarely did. He'd once sped across the entire globe in one run with the aid of warp rings. But he couldn't run straight into G.U.N. HQ in a blink without pushing his hyperspeed all the way to the max. He had to build up enough speed to blink through any phantom dangers. And there were a few pranks he could pull along the way.

Coincidentally, that meant taking the ten-second tour of London's most famous sights.

First, he spun himself around the London Eye. Then, he tore through Buckingham Palace and carried out a suit of armor with him, but it was just to make palace guards do a double take. (Which they totally did, don't tell!) He gained momentum across the Tower Bridge, past Abbey Road (sacred ground), and even to Piccadilly Circus (no clowns, thank goodness).

It all took just a few seconds, but he had the charge to go all the way, and in a blink, Sonic skidded through the doors of the G.U.N. building and found an army of traps waiting for him.

Flames shot up as he crossed the first level of floor tiles. But it wasn't just heat blasts. Approaching the elevator shaft, fans blew him up in a corkscrew spin where he was about to get sliced up. But it wasn't just the blender blades that posed great danger. As he spun his way across the ceiling, spikes burst forth, looking to stab him. It's almost like someone had programmed a giant game meant to stop Sonic from getting to his goal!

"Sonic! Wait! I've got to disable the full security system!" Tails' voice came over the comm.

But Sonic sped forward. He knew that only seconds stood between him and an evil strong enough to blow up the world. He could handle a few

extra booby traps, surely.

“Stop right there, Ro-Butt-Niks!” the hedgehog cried as he slid to a halt in front of the vault door. With a shudder, it opened, as egg drones from the dual doctors (and, Sonic had to note, their *ridiculous* outfits) worked to unveil the hidden contents of G.U.N.’s most secure location. Inside the spherical chamber, Sonic could see a glowing steel orb. It was some kind of container, and it had to hold the second launch key.

“Follow me, Pop-Pop!” Ivo Robotnik called. “Destiny awaits!” And with two steps, the pair of villains both leaped into the vault…and immediately stumbled to the floor, where they stuck like glue.

“Ivo!” the older man gasped. “Get up…!”

“I…can’t…!” grunted Sonic’s archnemesis.

Never looking a gift horse in the mouth, Sonic swirled and super sped to the ceiling and crossed into the vault at an angle only he could achieve. “Too slow, Eggmen! Now if you don’t mind, I gotta get that…whoooooa!” Suddenly, he was swimming in the air as if there were nothing between him and the void of deep space. Even though he was still inside! “My feet!” he cried. “Why can’t I use my beautiful feet!”

“Because the vault is armed with variable gravity,” said a woman behind them all. It was Rockwell, entering with a handful of guards at her back. She clicked a button, and her boots lit up floor tiles that allowed the director to walk with ease past everyone and snatch up the orb. Rockwell removed the launch key from its case and left the vault without even looking at the rest of them.

“Rockwell, listen to me,” Sonic pleaded. “The Robotniks are planning to—”

“Steal the second key just like you are?” she replied with barely contained contempt. “Yeah, I know. I called this the moment Walters was attacked. So congrats on taking the bait, alien. You fell right into our trap.”

“Trickery…,” Ivo struggled to say as he was smothered by gravity, “…is the generic knockoff…of genius!”

“Shut your mustache, Robotnik,” Rockwell replied. “I know you all thought you were so clever with your little schemes. But none of you ever really had the power to shut down all our security systems. And now we’ve got half of G.U.N.’s Most Wanted List under one roof.” At the edge of the room, Tom, Maddie, and even Tails were marched in, handcuffs on their

wrists. “It’s over. The only way you criminals are leaving is in chains. There’s no other way out.”

Sonic considered her threat for a minute and realized that maybe there was a way to beat her. He’d have to *think* fast. “You’re probably right, Rockwell.” The hedgehog smirked. “Then again, there might be *one* other way out. We just have to…*break glass in case of emergency*!”

“What does that even mean?” The director scowled at him as silence overtook the chamber. But just one more second was all he needed until…

*KA-BOOOOOOM!*

Like fire set on high, Knuckles burst through the wall, bringing shards of the building’s no longer protected glass surface with him. They should have cut the comms line when they found Tails’ hiding spot, but that would have involved G.U.N. knowing more about tech than the fox. And that was never gonna happen.

“See, fox? Nothing is unbreakable!” the echidna shouted as he landed in the room, charged with red energy from head to toe.

“Open fire!” Rockwell shouted. In the mix of crumbling building and scattered laser fire from the agents, the director dropped her control device, releasing both Sonic and the doctors from the wonky gravity prison. Sonic sprinted to the side of his family and started to undo their cuffs.

“Sonic! Go for the key!” Tom cried.

“Not until you guys are safe!”

“I’ve got an idea,” the Donut Lord said. “Trust me.” And with a flick of the button on his lapel, Tom transformed himself into someone else and darted into the fray.

On one side of the room, Knuckles blasted back shot after shot from the agents, but across the way, Ivo Robotnik tapped a handful of buttons and brought his egg drone back under his thumb. Sonic leaped in between the villains and Rockwell, hoping that he could at least keep the launch key out of their hands for a moment more. But as he blasted back and forth between the berserk bots, another face entered the mad scene.

“Director Rockwell…,” a shaky voice called out as Commander Walters, bruised but seemingly revived from his hospital bed, stepped forward.

“Commander? You’re…”

“Still alive?” The old soldier smiled. “I’ll die before I’ll let that key fall into the wrong hands. Good work keeping it safe. I’ll take it from here…”

“We both know I’m the only one you can trust with it,” Rockwell said, relieved.

“Thank you.” Walters nodded as he palmed the launch key. “Now get your people to safety at once.”

Yet as soon as Rockwell turned away to call her guards to form up for a retreat, Walters dodged out into a hallway.

“Walters, wait!” the hedgehog called.

With a turn of his head, the old man’s face melted away only to reveal the heroic grin of Tom Wachowski. “Guys, I’ve got the key. I finally figured out the face mask thingy! Now let’s get out of here.” He let the identity of Walters wave back over his own looks, and then disappeared ahead of them toward the stairwell.

*KA-POOOWWW!*

Another hole burst into the defenseless building. But this time, it wasn’t the wild swings of Knuckles that caused the commotion, but the vengeful power of Shadow. Sonic shivered as he struggled to make it to where he knew Shadow was, burning angrier than ever before.

“Commander Walters…,” the Ultimate Life-Form sneered. “It’s good to see you again!”

Shadow looked down at the man who he thought was his most hated foe, and in that instant spotted the launch key in Tom’s hand.

“No-no-no, wait!” Tom tried to speak. “You don’t underst—”

*Krunch!*

With one supercharged punch to the floor, Shadow sent a shockwave of broken concrete and chaos energy at Tom, slamming Sonic’s dad to the ground with deadly force. Sonic arrived in the hallway a split second too late. The launch key went flying, but he didn’t even look where it might land.

“TOM!” he cried. “NOOOOOOO!”

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# CHAPTER 16

Victory was in Shadow's grasp at last. It had been fifty years of waiting with the tortured memories of Maria's last day playing over and over in his mind. But now the man responsible was going to pay. And so would the entire rotten race that spawned Commander Walters.

Shadow reached to the ground and picked up the second launch key. With this small piece of plastic and metal, he would be able to activate the Eclipse Cannon and finally wipe away the hurt that had been delivered to him for as long as he could remember. But first, he had to dispatch that annoying, unserious little hedgehog…

"Tom! Tom, get up!" Sonic was pleading over the fallen body of Walters. "Please, GET UP!"

The blue one didn't seem to even care that Shadow had won. He just yelled at Walters' fallen body…though it wasn't Walters at all, was it? His vengeance would have to wait longer still. What was done was done. And yet, Shadow could not help but feel sorry for this creature's pain. He was no longer the joking fool with platitudes about their similarities.

In fact, when Sonic finally looked up from the body, he only said one word, laced with absolute fury. "You," he growled at Shadow, but Shadow was already teleporting away.

In a blink, Shadow stood next to the entrance to the vault. Nearby, Gerald Robotnik was taunting the remaining G.U.N. agents with one of his insipid egg drones.

"We have what we came for," Shadow said, lifting up the prized launch key with its eclipse symbol shimmering.

"And soon, we'll have vengeance!" the elder Robotnik cried. In all the time Shadow knew Gerald in his lab, he had rarely seen the scientist so… unhinged.

“So we have two keys…but where’s the Eclipse Cannon?” called the younger Robotnik. Ivo. He lurched up and stood back-to-back with his grandfather.

“It’s right here, my boy,” Gerald said with a mad glint in his eye. He snatched Shadow’s launch key to combine it with the one he previously took from the blue hedgehog. When the devices combined, it created a high-pitched sound. Suddenly, the building began to quake.

*Rrrrrrrrrrumble!!!*

Shadow stepped toward a large hole that had been blasted into the floor. Out along the skyline of the city of London, he watched as the tremor that originated with the G.U.N. HQ rocked a destructive path out to the river. The water opened up like a giant sinkhole, and what arose in its center was unlike anything the hedgehog had ever seen. It was some kind of spaceship —a massive black satellite rocket whose nose was now rising toward the sky.

Then in a shimmer of unearthly light, Shadow’s body was enveloped in energy, and he dematerialized. When someone else controlled his teleporting, the hedgehog found the effect…unnerving. But he soon regained solid form. And from the black bay window in front of him, he could tell that he was standing on the bridge of the Eclipse Cannon’s ship, looking up at the ruined G.U.N. building he’d just occupied. Both Robotniks were next to him.

“Welcome to my masterpiece!” bragged Gerald. The elder Robotnik marched around inspecting every inch of the high-tech weapon with pride. “I must hand it to them…they built her to my exact specifications.”

“It’s remarkable, astounding, and functionally dysfunctional!” Ivo danced around agog at the place. “That’s my genius grand genome!”

“And I’ve got one more surprise, my boy!” the elder said, pushing a button that revealed matching red space suits from a hidden compartment.

Ivo Robotnik put on his suit with the enthusiasm of a child in a costume shop, humming, “I’m a chip off the old block!” As his grandfather completed his own preflight prep, Shadow heard the younger Robotnik’s communicator blip to life.

“What do you want, Stone?! I’m busy!” he growled.

“Doctor, I have a bad feeling about this,” a sniveling voice came from the other end. “I don’t think your grandfather has been completely honest

with us. It's something Shadow said, there's more to their plan!"

"How dare you!" Ivo snapped. "You've been jealous of my long-lost grand pop-tart since the very beginning! I no longer require your obsequious groveling. Consider this your notice of termination. Your letter of reference will be *L* for loser. Of course, I expect you to stay on until you've been successfully cloned. But you and I are done like a blackened catfish dinner!"

"Sir, it's too dangerous and I'm not there to protect you," the assistant pleaded in vain. "I've already lost you once, I…"

"Unsubscribe! Blocked and reported!" Ivo cut the call short.

Shadow felt a momentary shiver of pity run through his quills, but Gerald soon swept in to keep the plan on track. "Do the honors, grandson," the old man said, snapping the two launch keys into a single tool and handing them over.

"These two interlocking keys represent the unbreakable malevolent bond of familial darkness that I wished for as a child in the orphanage." Ivo raised the key as his speech droned on. "Christmases were especially hard for me what with all the melodramatic family movies and…"

"Ivo! It's time to further the plot! Now, stick that MacGuffin in the hole," Gerald commanded at last.

"Let's light this candle!" Ivo called out in celebratory fashion, and in an instant both he and his grandfather were grinning as the turn of the key initiated the cannon ship's launch.

*CHOOOOOOOOOOOM!*

In a blast of fire surely more powerful than the meteorite that brought Shadow to Earth, the rocket rumbled from its river-based silo and ascended to the stars. The force of gravity pressed Shadow's body to the hard floor. In the corner of his eye, he could see the two doctors strap into matching captain's chairs. They cackled like lunatics all the way up.

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# CHAPTER 17

It was glorious to again engage in battle. Knuckles hardly had cause to test the might of his warrior muscles since arriving on Earth. Once he matched Sonic blow for blow before realizing that the hedgehog made for more than a worthy adversary but a worthy friend. And recently he had defeated renegade agents who sought to steal his own power, as well as the mad scientist who built them their weapons of war.

But even his adventure to break bones and go bowling in Reno, Nevada, could not compare to the thrill of tackling an entire legion of armed guardians on their home turf.

“See how you shatter like the glass I broke for this emergency!” the echidna howled with delight. Here he dodged laser fires, and there he smashed their plasma rifles as though they were children’s toys. Yet even as Knuckles confronted the unarmed agents with his mighty fists, he refused to batter their bodies. He was a noble warrior and embarrassing them in their home was victory enough for now.

Across the room, the two madmen called Robotnik sent their drones careening through the air, and Knuckles slammed his way toward them. With a bash and a swat, he crushed two of their egg drones to pieces, but he wanted more. He wanted those backstabbing trappers of animals to hurt more than anyone on Earth. And if he got a chance to face the dangerous hedgehog Shadow one-on-one, all the better.

It was not to be. As he reached their location, the floor of the building shook with intergalactic fury, and in a moment of bright light, all three villains disappeared. Knuckles could hear the sound of earth splitting apart through the hole he himself had created. But now there was nothing more to do than find his family and plan the next battle.

In the hall, the scene the warrior found was not one of triumph but tragedy.

“Tom, please wake up! You have to be okay!” Sonic cried over the limp form of the Lord of Donuts. “I need you…I need my dad…”

“Someone get a doctor! NOW!” Maddie commanded. But no humans rose to their aid.

*CHOOOOOOOOOOOM!*

Another hole in the building showed a sight unbelievable as a large black rocket shot past them and into the sky. “Oh no…” Tails shook his head, seeming to comprehend a dark turn in their fates.

At last, paramedics arrived and loaded the fallen Tom onto a gurney. They said he was stable, but unresponsive. Knuckles could not comprehend how both of those things could be true. But even in her grief, Maddie kept her head high as she followed him to the ambulance. Stunned silence overtook the team as Tom was taken away. But as usual, it was the hedgehog who spoke first.

“We can’t let them win,” Sonic said, fury and tears bursting from his visage. “We have to *destroy* them. And there’s only one way to do it now.”

“Wait, you don’t mean…,” Tails said.

“The Master Emerald.”

It could not be. Knuckles refused to believe this was the Sonic he knew. “No, hedgehog,” the warrior explained. “The Emerald must never be wielded for vengeance. We swore a sacred oath to protect it after our adventure to the planet of sand!”

“Don’t talk to me about oaths when Tom is fighting for his life and there’s a doomsday weapon threatening Earth!” Sonic shouted back.

“But you told Tom using the Emerald wasn’t the right choice,” Tails declared. “You said that yourself!”

“Well, now it’s the *only* choice. And if neither of you have the guts to make it…then I will.” Sonic shook with rage, something Knuckles had not thought possible before. “I’m not asking you twice, Knuckles. Where is the Master Emerald?”

Where the hedgehog was going, he would have to go alone. Though he respected Sonic’s warrior spirit, Knuckles would not budge on his sacred vow. “Your heart has been consumed by anger, hedgehog,” he said. “The Emerald’s power is too dangerous in your hands.”

“He’s right, Sonic!” Tails sprung between them before the argument came to blows. “No one can be trusted with a weapon that powerful. Remember?”

“Last chance,” Sonic seethed. *“Where. Is. It?”*

“As last of the Echidna, I will not break my sworn promise…even if you have chosen to break yours.” Knuckles shook his head. “I will protect the Emerald at all costs. That is why I have placed it under the watch of a trusted ally. Trained by my own hand. Forged in the fire of battle to become this planet’s most fearsome warrior!”

The tension hung in the air between them stronger than the unbreakable blade of an ancient knight. But suddenly, a light hit Sonic’s eyes. The hedgehog sprinted away, crossing the ocean.

“You gave the Master Emerald to Wade Whipple, didn’t you?” Tails asked.

“How did you know?”

Despite the fox’s unbelievable skills of deduction, Knuckles felt that Sonic might not find Wade before they did if they could only move fast enough. Using the warp rings from Tails’ bag of tricks, they soon found themselves on the other side of the world in Green Hills. Yet Wade was nowhere to be found. Not at his home, nor his bowling alley hall of triumph. At last, they teleported to his place of work—the beloved Green Hills Sheriff’s Department.

*Zam!*

Knuckles and Tails walked through the ring portal and into the station, but they found no sign of the young man-child of a warrior.

“Where could he be?” the fox asked, distraught.

“If we mediate, the answer may come to us,” Knuckles said. “Sometimes waiting for the hand of fate is the warrior’s only path.” They closed their eyes and concentrated, and the silence of the space felt like a holy shrine. Then suddenly, an answer came from on high.

“It all comes down to forty-one-year-old rookie sensation ‘Warrior Wade Whipple,’ ” called out their friend’s voice, just a whisper of its usual volume. “He leads the league in goals, assists, and broken hearts…and he’s flying up the ice with time for One. Last. Shot!”

*Clack!*

The sound of a stick hitting solid matter reverberated through the air, and both Knuckles and Tails knew where it had come from. “He’s on the roof playing hockey!” they cried in unison.

As the pair rushed outside and looked above them, they saw Wade rollerblading around the station’s uppermost level. But just that instant, Sonic himself appeared—still furious and undeterred.

“I’m here for the Emerald,” the hedgehog explained.

“What Emerald?” Wade stammered before all on-site looked down to the net he had just scored on and came to the realization that the warrior-in-training had been using the most powerful object in the known universe as his puck. “Oh, you mean this Emerald? I’m afraid that’s a ‘no can do,’ buddy. Me and Knuckles made a pact to protect it. Kind of a big deal.”

The hedgehog stepped toward the Master Hockey Emerald. “Sonic!” Wade stood his ground. “I promised to guard this thing with my life. And I’ll do whatever it takes to…”

*Whoooosh!*

In a flurry of speed, Sonic swiped up the Emerald and carried it to the edge of the roof. It was a noble effort from Knuckles’ protégé, but in the end, it was doomed to fail.

“Well, I tried.” Wade shrugged as Sonic began absorbing the unlimited green power of the Master Emerald. “But the good news is that you’d never wield that godlike power irresponsibly, right?” Without a word, Sonic rose in the air, shimmered with untold energy, and called forth a dark cloud on the horizon.

*Kra-Kow!*

Lightning struck the hedgehog, releasing a wave of power that blew all witnesses back into the dirt. Glowing with gold power and more anger than ever, the highly charged Super Sonic rose into the air and flew into space like a comet in reverse.

“That seems a little menacing, but I’m sure it’s fine,” Wade marveled, and then noticed Knuckles and Tails climbing the ladder to the roof. “Oh hey, guys! Everything okay?”

Knuckles did not know how to respond.

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# CHAPTER 18

At the edge of outer space, Super Sonic flew like a blazing comet.

It had happened once before, but it couldn't possibly feel familiar. Sonic's fur had transformed into that glowing, golden hue. His quills grew long and pulsated with energy. And as he rose ever faster, ever higher into the atmosphere, the now Super Sonic felt like nothing could ever harm him. Nothing would ever stop him.

And one major thing had changed since his last merging with the Master Emerald. Before he was only defending his home. But now, he was avenging his father. And the Robotniks and Shadow would know it.

*SHOOOOOOM!*

Super Sonic flew even faster, picturing his adversaries in his mind's eye. Shadow was lost and angry, but he was also dangerous. How could Sonic have ever thought the two of them were the same?

On the other side, using Shadow for their own nefarious purposes, was the family Robotnik. Gerald was an unknown factor, but he seemed even crazier than his gruesome grandson. And Ivo himself? He was never anything but a villain, but betraying all of planet Earth just to impress his putrid patriarch was too much.

The glittering power of the Eclipse Cannon came into view as Super Sonic's power increased alongside his rage. Back on Earth, Donut Lord's life hung by a thread. It was everything Sonic could do not to let the fear of that loss crush his spirit. He had to put everything back home out of his mind—even his friends. Team Sonic had always stood by him. Was Super Sonic too rash to take the power of the Emerald for his own? No. Only the fight mattered now.

One way or the other, it would be here in space where the story ended. Either Super Sonic wrestled control of the Eclipse Cannon from the trio of

villains, or Earth suffered the consequences. And as he sped the final miles toward the weapon's window, Super Sonic knew he wouldn't lose anymore.

"This ends NOW!" he screamed as he crashed into his final battle.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kiel Phegley is the author of several titles for Penguin Young Readers Licenses, including *Sonic the Hedgehog: The Official Movie Novelization*, *Sonic the Hedgehog's Race Against Chaos Sticker Activity Book*, and *Sonic and the Tales of Terror*.

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